

The Greatest Life Ever Lived

A Study in the Incarnate Life of Jesus Christ and An Exposition of the Four Gospels

LESSON XV : THE CIRCUMCISION OF JESUS / SIMEON & ANNA AT THE TEMPLE

Matthew	Mark	Luke 2:21-38	John	related passages Lev 12
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The Circumcision of 8-day old Jesus

v21 And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, : (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3) As John before Him, Jesus was circumcised on the day prescribed in the law of Moses. Luke uses the word *law* in this chapter five times, more than in all the rest of his gospel combined, emphasizing that Jesus was born “under the law” (Gal 4:4), meeting and fulfilling all points of the law (Mt 5:17). “The first of these [requirements of the law] was Circumcision, representing voluntary subjection to the condition of the Law, and acceptance of the obligations, but also of the privileges, of the Covenant between God and Abraham and his seed.” [Edersheim, *Life of Messiah*]

His name was called Jesus, which was so named of the angel before He was conceived in the womb. : note the emphasis Luke gives the narrative: circumcision is only mentioned in passing while the emphasis is on the naming of the child Jesus. This was the name given prior to His birth (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31) to *both* Joseph and Mary.

The Purification of Mary – 40 days after the birth of Jesus

v22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, : A Christian doctor, S. E. McMillen in his book *None of The Diseases*, gives several illustrations of the Lord’s wisdom in His practical commands given to Israel, many of which medical science was very reluctant to accept. Along with these commands falls the Lord’s teachings on purification. “As long as the woman who had given birth was still discharging the ensuing impurities, in general as long as her normal cycle had not fully returned, she was considered ‘ceremonially impure,’ and therefore not permitted to enter the sanctuary.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*] According to Lev 12:1-5, the length of time for her purification was 40 days for the birth of a male and 80 days for a daughter. Many admit ignorance as to why the length of time for a girl was twice as long as for a boy.

The KJV says the trip was made for *her* purification while many of the newer versions state it was for *their* purification. Either is acceptable. If the reading for *their* is accepted, then either Joseph had become ceremonially unclean by his contact with Mary (which would be perfectly understandable) or as the head of the household, Joseph comes to offer the sacrifice for Mary. The second was probably the case since the sacrifice offered was for one person (v24).

they brought Him to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord; : the first reason for their trip to Jerusalem was for Mary’s **purification**, to offer a sacrifice in accordance with the law. The second reason was for the **presentation** of the child which included the payment of a ransom fee, *the price of redemption for the Redeemer!*

v23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) : Since Jesus was from the tribe of Judah and not Levi, and being His mother’s firstborn son (Lk 2:7), the law stipulated that there was to be a price paid to redeem Him from temple service. **Summation of the law:** During the exodus, the Lord claimed all the firstborn of both man and beast since He slew the firstborn of Egypt on the night of the passover (Ex 13:2,11-15). Later in the wilderness He took unto Himself the tribe of Levi in exchange for the firstborn, the Levites therefore becoming the priestly tribe (Num 3:11-13,41,45). At that time the Lord took a count of the Levite males a month old or older; then He counted the males from the other tribes. For each male from the other tribes above the number of the Levites’ male, the Lord required a redemption price of five shekels (Num 3:47-51). The firstborn therefore was excluded from the service in the temple by paying the five shekels price of redemption (Num 18:15,16). A shekel is roughly equivalent to less than a dollar, which is not much until it’s considered how long the average worker had to work to get that much money in the culture of the times.

“The underlying idea of the redemption ritual was this: in the night of Israel’s deliverance from ‘the house of bondage’ all firstborn Egyptians were slain (Ex 12:29). However, in God’s holy sight not only the Egyptians but also the Israelites had forfeited their lives. In place of death God was willing to accept from the tribe of Levi lifelong service in the tabernacle or (later) temple, and from the firstborn of the other tribes five shekels, as a symbolic offering, a confession, as it were.” [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

v24 and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. : the offering prescribed in Lev 12:6,7 was a lamb of the first year and a young pigeon or dove. If she could not bring that, she could bring two doves or pigeons, for two birds could be purchased for a tenth of the cost of a lamb and a bird. While the implication read into the passage is that Joseph and Mary were desperately poor, the passage does not demand it. Joseph was a carpenter and considering the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, their stay in Bethlehem for over a month and their having to pay the redemption price, he may not have had the money at his disposal at that time. This is the most that could accurately be said of their condition, anything else is conjecture.

Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis"

v25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; : little is known of Simeon but it is assumed by lack of reference that he held no particular office in the temple service; i.e. he was what we would call a layman.

and the same man was just and devout, : mentioning both the way Luke does could refer to the fact that Simeon was *just, righteous* in the dealings with other men, and *devout, pious* in His service to the Lord. *Devout* is a combination of two words meaning essentially *to take hold of well*. In reference to spiritual things, it emphasizes the cautious, careful observance of God's commands.

waiting for the consolation of Israel: : "To be sure, conditions were bad, very bad, in Israel at the time of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Think of loss of political independence, cruel King Herod, externalization of religion, legalistic scribes and Pharisees and their many followers, worldly-minded Sadducees, the silence of the voice of the prophecy, etc. But in the midst of all this darkness, degradation, and despair there were men who were hopefully looking forward to, and earnestly expecting, 'the consolation of Israel.'" [Hendriksen, *Luke*]

"waiting for" = looking forward to. Also used in v38, 12:36; 23:51, and in 15:2 in the sense *to welcome*.

and the Holy Ghost was upon him. : I personally believe the Holy Spirit indwelt believers in the OT just as He does in the NT. The reference here is to the Holy Spirit being upon Simeon in a special way for His use. This points not only to the sovereign Spirit who uses who He wills (Acts 13:2; 1 Cor 12:4-11) but also to the submission of Simeon, allowing himself to be used by the Lord (Eph 5:18; 1 Thes 5:19).

There is a movement and a misunderstanding among believers in our culture that greatly weakens not only the average Christian life but the pulpits of America as well. Christianity has become so carnal that any believer that shows an above-average interest in the word of God is considered "called to preach." "The Lord really has His hand on that person, he must be destined for the pulpit or mission field." Why not for the factory, the secretarial pool, the retail store, or the gas station? Why is everyone who studies his bible destined for Africa? I believe part of the blame must be attributed to today's high-pressure evangelism which is filling our churches with the lost so that the true believer immediately stands out. We need to return to the Simeon's (and the Elizabeth's, the Mary's, and the Anna's that Luke is soon to introduce) who are people that love the Lord day in and day out *as a lay person!* As Simeon of old, we need to emphasize that **a spiritual walk with the Lord is the norm for believers. Studying the deeper truths of the Word of God is not a blessing and responsibility reserved for the spiritual elite but for all.** Concerning being called to the ministry, it has been well said that *if a man can be happy outside of the ministry, then he should stay out of the ministry.*

v26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. : the same Spirit which abided within Simeon rested in power upon him as well, and had revealed to him that he was not to see death before he had seen the Messiah. Most read into this that Simeon was an old man at the time but again it must be pointed out that the passage does not *demand* such a reading. I would tend to agree with the general sentiment however, the basis being the statements "he would not see death until..." and "Lord, now let Thy servant depart...". Hendriksen states, "I do not hesitate to picture Simeon as an old man, even though I admit that absolute proof for this position is lacking." [*Luke*]

"it was revealed" = "Lit., *it was having been revealed*; i.e., it *stood* revealed, while he waited for the fulfillment of the revelation.... The word here implies that the revelation to Simeon had been given in answer to prayer." [Vincent, *Word Studies*]

v27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: : literally "in the Spirit he came into the temple," the same phrase being used of John on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). In John's instance, God as it were freed him from the restraints of time and space to see what was to come. Here however Simeon is thoroughly conscious of his surroundings. Some believe Simeon is very much aware of the Spirit's leading at this point when he meets Jesus in the temple. I'm of the opinion however that he had no special "feelings of guidance" or no "inner voice" saying it was time to go to the temple. It's been my experience that the Lord works "behind the scenes" and more often than not something just happens that a lost person would attribute to luck or say was merely a coincidence. The Lord controls all circumstances of all events, and most of the time we are very much *unaware* of His presence and guidance. Vincent agrees, writing that the phrase indicates "his spiritual *condition*, as one who walked with God [rather] than a special divine impulse." [*Word Studies*]

and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for Him after the custom of the law, : "His parents" is not a denial of the virgin birth since Joseph was the legal father of Jesus while not the paternal father.

"after the custom" is literally *according to that which was wont to be done*. According to Vincent, it is only used here in the NT and the kindred words *custom* and *to be accustomed* occur more frequently in Luke than elsewhere. Vincent goes on to say however that it is a very common phrase in medical writings, giving further indication of Luke's vocation.

v28 then took he Him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, : what follows is referred to as Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis," taken from the first words in the Latin version. This is the last of the five songs Luke brings forth in the infancy narratives, and is a hymn of joyful resignation. In poetic form:

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart

in peace, according to Thy word:

*for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,
which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
a light to lighten the Gentiles,
and the glory of Thy people Israel.*

v29 Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word: : “Lord” is not the usual Greek word for Lord, kurios. The word here is the Greek word despota and carries with it more of a connotation of *slave-master*. The word for servant is doulos, the typical word used often by Paul especially but one which carries with it the connotation of *slave, bond-servant*. Many commentators therefore take this to have the sense (at least figuratively) of “Now, O slave-master, grant manumission (releasing from slavery), at least dismissal from further duty, to thy slave.” While this cannot be denied, at least in pictorial form, the sense is not as negative as would be assumed in our culture. Godet: “The word apoluein, *to release, discharge*, contains the two ideas of relieving a sentinel on duty, and delivering from the burden of life. These two ideas are mixed up together here, because for a long time past Simeon’s earthly existence had been prolonged simply in view of this special mandate. The term despota, *lord*, expresses Simeon’s acknowledgment of God’s absolute right over him.” [Luke]

“to release” is used of releasing a prisoner (Mt 27:15-26), releasing a debtor, wiping out his debt (Mt 18:27), to forgive, pardon (Lk 6:37), to dismiss a crowd (Lk 9:12) or a person (Lk 8:38), to divorce a marriage partner (Mk 10:2,4). To be used in the sense of *discharging a person from his earthly post, to let him depart in death* is one of the uses of the verb as it has been found on gravestones.

“Now” is pointing to a definite point in time; Simeon means he is *now* ready to depart in peace since the Lord has fulfilled His promise. Godet adds that it could be take as “at last, after such long waiting.” [Luke]

v30 for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, : the “salvation” spoken of by Simeon is defined later as *light* and *glory*. To the Gentiles the Lord is light, to Israel He is their glory (Isa 52:10).

v31 which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people; : people is plural, referring equally to the Gentiles.

v32 a light to lighten the Gentiles, : light being the true knowledge of God, holiness and love. Not that the Lord was not a light unto Israel as well, but the Gentile’s darkness was deepest. The sense of “to lighten the Gentiles” could be rendered *for revelation, to the shewing, the unveiling of the Gentiles*. (Isa 42:6; 49:6)

and the glory of Thy people Israel. : as before, He is glory as well for the Gentiles but no one can read the bible without seeing the place of Israel in the plan of redemption.

v33 And Joseph and His mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of Him. : Vincent says the combination of the words denote continuance or progression, *they were marvelling* while Simeon was speaking. Why would Joseph and Mary be amazed? Note it is not that Simeon prophesied concerning Jesus, but the things which Simeon had *said* concerning the child. An answer could be found that even though they had heard amazing things concerning their firstborn directly from an angel themselves, and although the shepherds had repeated the things they had been told concerning the child, neither had mentioned anything specific about both the Gentiles and Israel. “Besides, the revelations which Joseph and Mary received about their child were all so wonderful that even a measure of repetition would not have curtailed their amazement. Even today Jesus Christ is so altogether marvelous and the salvation He has provided so bountiful that we love the song: ‘Sing them *over again* to me, wonderful words of life.’” [Hendriksen, Luke]

v34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary His mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; : Having invoked God’s blessing on Joseph and Mary, Simeon continues to speak to Mary in words which must have startled her. In substance he said Jesus would become the great Divider, not by accident but by the definite purpose of the divine plan. In other words, **one’s relation or attitude towards Jesus would be decisive of his eternal destiny**. Some would *fall*, rejecting Him and being eternally separated from Him. Others would *rise*, accepting Him through the sovereign operation of God (John 1:11-13; 3:18). **“By means of their attitude to Jesus men would be constantly revealing the thoughts or deliberations of their hearts. They would show whether they were ‘for’ or ‘against’ Him. Neutrality would be forever impossible** (Luke 11:23; cf. Matt 12:30).” [Hendriksen, Luke] “Fall” is the same word used in the describing the man who built his house on sand: *to fall, collapse, crash*. “Rise” is the same word used to describe a resurrection, used of Jesus rising from the dead, the resurrection of souls, and the resurrection of bodies.

“is set” means primarily *to be laid, to lie* and is used in the sense of being *set forth, appointed, destined*.

Jesus was also to be a *sign*, i.e. He would point away from Himself to the One Who sent Him, performing His works and proclaiming His words. In claiming to be Who He is, Jesus would therefore be spoken against. “Spoken against” is not spoken of in the prophetic sense but rather that it would be an inherent characteristic of the sign, a sign in which it would characteristically experience antagonism from the world. *From the beginning with Herod to the cross, it is evident that sinners hate holiness*.

v35 (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. : parenthetically, Simeon addresses Mary directly. “Sword” is a large and broad sword. Used in the LXX of Goliath’s sword (1 Sam 17:51). This was fulfilled in John 19:25-27, and is something any parent (but especially the mothers) can relate to.

Simeon ends with what has already been mentioned. By the very presence of Jesus, He reveals the hearts of those who contact Him. As the law was given to show our need of a Savior by revealing the fact we are sinners (Rom 7), outwardly moral people reveal their inner sinful nature by their attitude towards Jesus. Illustration: a couple who has found it difficult to find themselves among God's people on a regular basis recently made the comment that the unsaved are often nicer to be around than the saved. Upon thinking on the statement later, I must admit I found an element of truth in the comment (we Christians may be so un-Christlike at times, can we not?). But the thought also came to mind that *if they can find such sweet fellowship with the unsaved, the conversation must never center on Jesus. As long as we talk about sports, work, our spouses, cars or the like, people can be very nice. Talk about Jesus, the bible and holiness and the people we thought were moral would show their inner being of sin* (I'm not saying talk against other Christians and their faults; *the unsaved would gladly join in that chorus!*).

Anna's Thanksgiving

v36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, : Anna's (*Channah*) name means grace. The only other time the word *prophetess* is used in the NT is to describe Jezebel in Rev 2:20. She with Simeon bore witness of the Christ-child. Israel had in the temple the mouth of two witnesses, of which every word must be established.

the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: : note she belonged to the tribe of Asher, one of the supposed ten lost tribes. This is one of the indications that while the northern kingdom of Israel was deported by the Assyrians seven hundred years earlier, there were those of the ten tribes who remained faithful and could trace their lineage. The fact that Luke was aware of this also indicates the Jews kept these records current.

she was of a great age, : literally, "advanced in many days."

and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; : much earlier she had been married for seven years prior to her husband dying. Note her purity prior to marriage.

v37 and she was a widow of about four-score and four years, : literally, "and she a widow up to eighty-four years." Two interpretations: she either had been married then a widow for eighty-four years, or she was eighty-four years old at the present time. Against the former is that she would have been a very, very old woman indeed. If married at the age of fourteen (not unlikely in that culture) she would have been $14 + 7 + 84 = 105$ years old! While possible, the story would indicate Anna was still very active which is much more believable at the age of eighty-four rather than one hundred and five years old. Considering Ps 90:10, eighty-four years old would be considered old.

which departed not from the temple, : Edersheim states that no one actually lived at the temple and especially not a woman, although the High Priest had chambers there. [*Life of Messiah*] This is probably a hyperbole and refers to her being present at the temple for all the services. Even today if one goes to many of the church functions outside the regularly scheduled services, they could be heard to say "I live there."

but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. : her presence was not merely an outward discipline which was done for show but rather she thought rightly about herself, others, and the kingdom of God.

v38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, : we could picture her in one of the courts of the temple when she probably overhears all that Simeon had to say. She believes what Simeon had said and responds with immediate thanksgiving to the Lord.

and spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem. : from that point on she speaks to those who are like-minded with her, those who look for the consolation of Israel.