

A Call to Hope

Lesson Text: Luke 2:22-38 **Devotional Reading:** Psalm 71:1-8. **Background Scripture:** Luke 2:22-38.

TIME: 6 or 5 B.C. **PLACE:** temple in Jerusalem

Luke 2:22-38

²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

³³ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” ³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

TODAY'S AIM

- Facts: to show that God confirmed Jesus' coming as the hope of the world.
- Principle: to teach that only in Jesus Christ is the world able to find true hope.
- Application: to urge students to put their faith in Jesus, knowing that in Him there is always hope.

INTRODUCTION

Today's lesson tells the story of the encounter of Jesus and His parents with two special people. We meet these two only briefly in the pages of Scripture, but their witness has the power to have a lasting impact on our lives. They are Simeon and Anna, and they have waited their entire lifetimes to see the promised Messiah. Their personal experience, however, served to do more than allow them to glimpse God's promised Messiah with their own eyes. Both Simeon and Anna have a prophetic ministry to fulfill.

LESSON BACKGROUND

From one perspective the birth of Jesus was a spectacular event. It was heralded by a sky full of angels. A supernatural star marked the occasion. The infant was sought out by wealthy magi from foreign lands. An evil king feared for his throne.

From another perspective, Jesus' birth was remarkably mundane. This is seen in today's lesson as Jesus' parents follow the traditional rituals required of the Jews in regard to a firstborn son. The incident reveals both the faithfulness and the poverty of Joseph and Mary. While this trip to the temple may have been exciting for this rural couple, it was a common exercise among their people.

Yet in the midst of the routine, God had a few more surprises for them. They met Simeon and Anna, people with divine insight beyond the visible circumstances. These two had an understanding of God's master plan for redemption and the central role of Jesus in that plan.

Sometimes we have been taught that the office of prophet ceased with the completion of the Old Testament and that Malachi was the last of the line. Reading the New Testament, however, reveals a lively interest in prophets and prophecy at the time of Jesus. Prophets were not necessarily those who foretold the future, although that may be an aspect of their ministry. Prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit to preach God's message: a call for justice and repentance among the people and a proclamation of Israel's hope for a Messiah. Several people serve a prophetic role in the Gospel of Luke, including Elisabeth (1:41-45), Zechariah (1:67), John the Baptist (7:26;

20:6), and even Jesus Himself (7:16).

In this lesson, Simeon and Anna are prophetic people. Anna is specifically called a prophetess (Luke 2:36), while Simeon speaks prophetically under the influence of the Holy Spirit (2:25-35).

Obedience to the Law (Luke 2:22-24)

Parents' Actions (v. 22)

Leviticus 12 gives us some background information for this incident. According to the Mosaic law, when a woman gave birth to a male child, she was ceremonially unclean for seven days. On the eighth day, the baby boy was to be circumcised, and the mother would continue to be unclean for the next thirty-three days. At the end of her forty days of impurity, she was to appear before the priest with a lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering.

One exception was allowed, however. If the woman and her husband were too poor to afford a lamb for an offering, they could take two pigeons or two turtledoves instead (Lev. 12:8). One of them was for the sin offering, and the other was for the burnt offering. The sin offering was for cleansing, and it was followed by the burnt offering, which was a symbol of purity and fellowship with God. If the baby boy was a firstborn son, he was then to be presented to God (Exod. 13:12).

Every Jewish boy was circumcised and named on the eighth day after his birth. Jesus' parents followed this ritual with Him (Luke 2:21).

The fact that they took birds instead of a lamb indicates they were people of very modest means. We know Joseph was a workingman, a carpenter, rather than someone of royalty. This was not important to God. What was important was the heart of this man and that of his wife. No doubt they gave what they could willingly.

1. What information does Leviticus 12 give that helps us understand what Joseph and Mary were doing (Luke 2:22-24)?

People who feel that God has shown them special favor sometimes think that it is not that important for them to serve in some basic and ordinary ways in the church. The earthly parents of Jesus seem to have been just as anxious to fulfill humbly their responsibilities as they were before. They believed they now had far more reason to praise and honor God because of the ways He had worked in their lives.

The same should be true for us. The more we are blessed, the greater should be our desire to serve God and fulfill our responsibilities to Him.

2. What inspiration can we gain from the fact that Joseph and Mary faithfully fulfilled their obligations under the Old Testament law, despite having been shown special, miraculous attention by God?

Encounter with Simeon (Luke 2:25-28)

In Jerusalem there was a very godly man named Simeon who was expecting the Messiah to appear soon. He is described as *"just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel."* "Consolation" is a reference to the Messiah, who would bring comfort and encouragement to His people. Simeon was in close communion with God. His belief was more than something in his head; he had a true heart relationship with the Lord.

Because of that, he was able to discern the voice of God when He spoke to him. It is sad that in our noisy and busy world we so often have difficulty hearing the still, small voice of God. The only way this can happen for us on a regular basis is for us to make an effort to get away from the busyness and noise and spend quiet time alone with Him. During this time, as we read His Word and pray, God can, and often will, speak to us through His Spirit and give us the guidance we need regarding the situations we face.

3. What do we know about Simeon (v. 25)?

It might seem unusual that Luke specifically mentioned that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon. In the Old Testament economy, the Spirit came upon people for certain specific purposes, but it seems He withdrew after those purposes were fulfilled. Beginning in the book of Acts, this changed.

In the New Testament economy, the Spirit dwells permanently within every true believer, serving as a guarantee of our eternal destiny (Eph. 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit apparently was upon Simeon at that time for a specific purpose.

The Spirit's purpose was to tell Simeon that he would not die without first seeing God's promised Messiah. This godly person was blessed to hear and understand that message.

4. Why did Luke say the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon, and what message did the Spirit give him (v. 26)?

Simeon had been given a special revelation from God, meaning he was given information that could not have been known apart from God's intervention. When the time came for this revelation to be fulfilled, the Holy Spirit specifically led Simeon to the temple. He was there, therefore, on the exact day and at the exact time when Joseph and Mary arrived with their baby. This was not a stroke of good luck but rather the clear guidance of this man by the Holy Spirit of God.

At that moment a meeting of godly people took place. Joseph and Mary were obediently following the law at the same time Simeon was led by the Spirit to be in the temple. What a time of rejoicing resulted! The nation of Israel was filled with ungodliness and corruption, but God was doing a very significant work among His people. He was accomplishing it through those who truly loved Him with all their hearts. Much could be said about our own times in comparison. May we be those through whom He can accomplish His will.

While Joseph and Mary were just new parents, the implication is that Simeon was elderly. He gave evidence of a lifelong commitment to his God, and now God was rewarding him in a way no other man was being rewarded. His faithfulness to the Lord allowed him a privilege beyond what anyone else would ever know. It should be an encouragement to us to strive for the kind of faithfulness and commitment we observe in the life of this man. God is well aware of those who love Him with all their hearts, and He will bless accordingly.

We can only imagine the deep joy in Simeon's heart as he took Jesus in his arms. As he did so, he lifted his voice in praise to God. He was holding the Messiah!

5. What did the meeting of Simeon, Joseph, and Mary reveal about God's working in those days (vs. 27,28)?

Simeon's Joy (Luke 2:29-35)

Simeon began his praise by referring to his willingness to die now that he had seen the Messiah. This is another indication that he was an elderly man not expecting to live much longer. His life was complete now that he had seen that which was the greatest desire of his heart. He knew the ultimate salvation of Israel rested with this little baby, and that gave him an absolute sense of peace regarding the future of his people. Only a godly person who is certain of an intimate relationship with God can be so ready to die.

Simeon also knew that Jesus was the hope of salvation for the Gentiles. Both they and the Jews are mentioned in verse 32. Isaiah 9:1,2, speaking of Galilee of the Gentiles, declares that the people walking in darkness would one day see a great light. Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 also tell about the Messiah being sent as a light to the Gentiles. In Jesus, salvation would be available to them so that they could be transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Simeon was knowledgeable of the Old Testament and realized prophecy was now being fulfilled.

Luke 2:29-32 is in the form of a prophetic psalm of praise. It is often referred to by the Latin title *Nunc Dimittis* (meaning "now you dismiss"). It was both Simeon's expression of willingness to die and an explanation as to why he felt that way. This psalm has been set to music and is often heard during the Christmas season.

6. How did Simeon begin his expression of praise upon seeing Jesus, and why did he feel that way (vs. 29,32)?

Simeon was apparently aware from his knowledge of the Old Testament that God had often spoken of His love and plan for the people of all nations. Our own study of God's plan for the nations will impress on us that the good news of Jesus is for the whole world, a fact made even clearer in the New Testament. Watching news from around the world, paying attention to the work of missionaries supported by our church, meeting the practical needs of others, and praying for a selfless spirit can help us develop an outward focus.

7. Simeon received a special personal blessing, but focused even more on the blessing Jesus would be to others (verses 29-32). How can we each develop that kind of missionary mind-set?

We noted earlier that Joseph and Mary were just common people, not royalty or among the wealthy classes. Is it any wonder that they "marvelled" at what they were hearing from Simeon? The Greek word behind this English word means "to wonder." They were neither prominent nor powerful people, but they had been chosen to bring the Son of God, the Messiah, into the world. No one else throughout the entire history of mankind ever had, or will have, that privilege. They were utterly amazed.

Simeon then blessed Joseph and Mary and explained what God was going to do through their son. The future of the people of Israel was tied to Him, for their future depended on their response to Him. Some would believe; some would not. Believers are referred to as rising, while those who reject Jesus are seen as falling. These terms graphically portray the destinies of eternal salvation and eternal damnation. We get another glimpse of this as Jesus wept over Jerusalem during His last week (Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 19:41-44).

8. What prophecy did Simeon utter concerning Jesus (vs. 33,34)?

Simeon was telling Joseph and Mary that Jesus would be a catalyst for controversy. The inner, private thoughts of people would be revealed by their responses to Him (Luke 2:35). During those days there were some who genuinely loved God; others did not and merely went through the religious rituals. Those who loved Him would accept Jesus as their Messiah; others would reject Him and speak openly against Him. Simeon warned Mary that a "sword" would pierce her soul. She was going to be brokenhearted over the things she would have to witness.

9. What did Simeon say to Mary about what she would go through (v. 35)?

Encounter with Anna (Luke 2:36-38)

One other person is recorded in the Bible as having the same eager anticipation for the Messiah that Simeon had. Her name was Anna, and she is designated as a prophetess whose heritage was in the tribe of Asher. She had been married only seven years when her husband died and left her a widow. She had never remarried but had devoted herself to serving God continually. Night and day she fasted and prayed in absolute devotion to and worship of God.

The phrases "*she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four*" does not clearly tell us whether this was her age or how long she had been a widow. Both views are widely accepted among Bible scholars; so we probably cannot settle the issue here. Either way, it is clear she was quite old and had given herself wholly to the service of God in the temple. She serves as an example of commitment that should challenge every Christian.

This was the way J. W. Shepard expressed his observations: "She literally lived in the Temple never missing a service. Her constant occupation was in fasting and prayers."

As a prophetess, Anna was surely very well acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures. To what extent she taught them or instructed others we are not told. Because of her intimate knowledge of God's Word, she would have realized what a momentous occasion it was when she laid eyes on the long-awaited Messiah.

10. What do we know about Anna's personal and spiritual life (vs. 36,37)?

One thing we learn is that people who are constantly in tune with God sometimes get to see and experience things that others miss. In this account it seems that God is honoring two people whose hearts were fully seeking after His own.

Simeon lived for the day he could see God's Messiah. Anna's life was devoted to prayer and worship at the temple. Time with God in prayer, Bible reading, meditation, fasting, corporate worship, and group Bible study increase our understanding of God's heart. In turn, all this will increase our desire to know Him even more.

11. It is obvious that both Simeon and Anna enjoyed an extraordinary relationship with God. What can we learn from that to strengthen our own walk with the Lord?

As in the case of Simeon, God rewarded this faithful woman with a special privilege. Anna came into the very area of the temple courts where Simeon, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were and at the very instant when Simeon was speaking of Him. The text does not say she was led there by the Holy Spirit as it does of Simeon. This might be what happened, or it might simply have been one of her regular prayer times. Either way, it was arranged by God, and became one of the most joyous occasions of her life.

12. What was significant about this particular visit to the temple (v. 38)?

Anna's Thanks (v. 38)

Anna's first response upon realizing what was taking place was to give thanks. She recognized the tremendous significance of the appearance of this baby, for she understood that centuries of waiting had just come to an end. All the prophecies of the Messiah were now being fulfilled. The clear opportunity for salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike was now at hand. It is doubtful we can adequately describe Anna's gratitude.

Her second response was to immediately spread the word about the presence of the One who would offer redemption to those who were looking for it. These were the faithful remnant of Jews who were truly godly and sincerely waited for the coming of their Messiah. While many were not concerned, those who were now heeded Anna's instruction. Their heretofore unfulfilled hope was now being realized. Anna multiplied her joy by sharing it.

13. What were Anna's two responses after she saw the Baby Jesus?

CONCLUSION

Hope in the Heart

What a difference hope makes! I am reminded of the little boy who had been promised a fishing trip with his father for the next day. As he went to bed he joyfully hugged his father and said, "Thanks, Daddy, for tomorrow." That's hope! Israel had hoped for a Redeemer for centuries before Jesus came. Jesus is hope realized. Paul dedicated himself to preaching this "hope of Israel" (see Acts 28:20).

Hope makes life livable. How can we possibly endure tragedy if we have no hope? How can we face death without the hope of the resurrection? Hope is faith's view of the future. We believe that no matter how bad things may get, God loves us and will never desert us. As John promises, "perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Dread of the future is the opposite of hope. Fear of the future leads to worry, anxiety, even depression. Hope for the future gives us the strength to face what life throws at us. For decades Simeon and Anna hoped, and God did not disappoint them. He will do no less for us.

Singing Our Hope to the World

How can we share hope with our fearful, terrified world? Here are some practical suggestions. First, let your joy out. Don't hoard your joy, share it! Share it with both your believing and nonbelieving friends. A remarkable thing will happen. You won't run out of joy, because God will replenish your supply endlessly.

Second, anticipate good things for the future. Anna endured decades of loneliness as a widow for the moment of pure joy she experienced when she saw Jesus. Not everything in the future will be pleasant. But God loves you and will bless you immeasurably if you trust Him. Ultimately God will receive you into His presence and say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Third, be sure you focus your hope on Jesus, not yourself. If all you have to show a terrified world is your own life, you will not bring hope. We probably all have known people who have been betrayed so many times that they trust no one. They depend only on themselves. What miserable, futile lives they lead! How much better to trust Jesus, the Son of God, the conqueror of death. How much better to live and serve in a community of believers that has the common hope of abundant life because of Jesus Christ! When your life sings hope, it must sing Jesus.

PRAYER

Dear God, may we be people of hope. May we live as if we know our future is secure. May our lives sing of our hope to a world living desperately without hope. We pray in the name of the One who brings hope to all, Jesus the Christ, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Live without fear of the future because of the hope Jesus brings.