

Luke 2:21-39 – Jesus' Presentation at the Temple

Today we see the 8 day-old Jesus stepping into his role of Savior by being made subject to God's laws for us. And why was this necessary? Because it is only through the keeping of God's law that righteousness is obtained. We are sinful and cannot keep God's law the way he demands. We, therefore, can never earn the righteousness we need to stand before God. God knew this about us, and this is why He sent his Son, as we read in Galatians:

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law,⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

Jesus himself said:

¹⁷ *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)*

And so we see Jesus doing exactly that which he came to do: fulfilling the law for us – as demonstrated by the care of his parents to keep every ordinance required by Old Testament law regarding the birth of a firstborn son.

Our text begins:

²¹ *On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. (Luke 2:21)*

Last Sunday we talked about the importance of circumcision in the Jewish faith. Now it must be said that Jesus – in and of himself – did not need to be circumcised. Why not? Because circumcision was a sign of the promise of forgiveness from sin. Jesus was sinless. But, in order to fulfill all righteousness and submit himself under the law, He was circumcised according to the following precept found in Leviticus:

'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days . . . On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. (Leviticus 12:2-3)

By undergoing circumcision, Jesus was obeying God's law and winning righteousness for us. But there is also something else to note: circumcision is painful. Pain is a result of sin. He we see Jesus suffering – shedding blood for the first time.

How is eight day old Jesus already acting as our Savior from sin?

[*Answer* – He is submitting to God's law for us – thereby winning our righteousness. He is suffering and shedding blood for us– all in order to be our Savior from sin.]

Our text continues:

²² *When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (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." (Luke 2:22-24)*

Two Old Testament ceremonial laws being mentioned here: one for Mary and the other for Jesus. Let's look at the one regarding Jesus first.

After God rescued the Israelites from slavery by killing all the first born males of the Egyptians, but "passing over" the firstborn sons of Israel, the LORD required that the Israelites present their firstborn sons to Him for service in the temple in remembrance of this salvation.

² *"Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal." (Exodus 13:2)*

A short time later, at Mount Sinai, the LORD dedicated the tribe of Levi to take the place of all the firstborn sons of Israel (cf. Numbers 3) but, as a perpetual reminder, the Israelites would always have to present and redeem ("buy back") their first born sons from the LORD to whom they belonged. We read in Numbers:

But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. ¹⁶ When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. (Numbers 18:15-16)

This is what Mary and Joseph did with Jesus. They presented him to the priests in Jerusalem and paid 5 shekels of silver (about \$100 in today's terms) to "redeem" him.

The other ceremonial law that Mary and Joseph performed was that of Mary's purification. We read in Leviticus:

Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. . . . ⁶ "When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. ⁷ He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. "These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. ⁸ If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.' (Leviticus 12:4, 6-8)

Now we might wonder why God instituted such a law – and looking at the variety of Old Testament ceremonial laws would be a fascinating topic for a future Bible class – but due to time constraints let this suffice: perhaps the custom of being unclean after child birth and the need for purification was meant to illustrate the truth confessed by David, when He wrote:

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51:5 NKJV).

In other words – we are all sinful from birth. We inherit sin from our parents. Nothing we do is without sin. We need a Savior.

What does Mary and Joseph's offering tell you about their financial status?

[Answer: They were poor.]

²⁵ *Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon (Luke 2:25)*

The only thing we know about Simeon is that he was a man from Jerusalem. We don't know his age. We don't know his occupation. Since Luke is silent on this matter, many assume that he was a man of no particular consequence or position. He seems to have been just a regular guy – who did have one remarkable trait:

[He] was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. (Luke 2:25)

Simeon was a believer. He was a man who knew his sins and looked forward to the coming Messiah who would take them all away. Because of this faith, God counted him as righteous. Because of this faith, Simeon lived a life devoted to God. He lived by the precept later expressed by St. Paul:

¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)*

How does Simeon serve as an example for Christian men?

[*Answer:* Even though he was probably a man of no particular consequence to the world, He still made the Lord his top priority. He looked to the LORD for the forgiveness that comes by faith in the Savior and lived his life devoted to God – meditating on his word and giving glory to God through all his actions.]

²⁶ *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.* ²⁷ *Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.* (Luke 2:26-27)

Notice that this meeting was not a mere coincidence. The Holy Spirit directed Simeon to the child – fulfilling His promise that He would not die until after He saw the Christ. Why was this promise given to Simeon? Scripture does not tell us. God chose Simeon according to his grace – the same grace that moves God to mercifully act towards all who believe in him.

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 now dismiss your servant in peace.* ³⁰ *For my eyes have seen your salvation"* (Luke 2:27-30)

How are we to understand Simeon's words? Most people view Simeon as an old man who – now that He has seen the Christ according the LORD's own promise – says that the LORD can take Him to heaven in peace. Why? Because, having seen the Christ, He is confident of the forgiveness and salvation this child would win for him. As St. Paul says:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)

Another way to understand Simeon's words is to translate them literally. A literal reading would be "*Master, set your slave free in peace, according to your word.*" This would correspond to what Paul says in Romans:

²² *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.* (Romans 6:20-22)

Regardless of which way you interpret Simeon's prayer, the point is this: the believer is at peace with God because of the salvation the child in Simeon's arms would accomplish.

He continues:

³⁰ *"For my eyes have seen your salvation* ³¹ *which you have prepared in the sight of all people,* ³² *a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* (Luke 2:30-32)

God has prepare this salvation for everyone to see and know – therefore it is in the sight of all people. And the salvation Jesus would bring will reveal God to the Gentiles – to all the non-Jewish peoples that did not know Him and His Word. How? Through the preaching of the Gospel. This is would be in fulfillment of what the LORD said to the Messiah through the pen of Isaiah:

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

What was Joseph's and Mary's response to all this? We read:

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.* (Luke 2:33-35)

One of saddest Old Testament prophecies concerning the Christ is that:

for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. (Isaiah 8:14)

What does this mean? It means that, because Jesus would not fit false ideas of who the Messiah should be and what he should do – many people would fall away from the faith. Jesus lowliness and humility – his desire to save people from their sins and aversion to political aspirations – would reveal what truly was in the heart of the Israelites. Those who didn't recognize their sins and need for a Savior would reject him and fall from grace – losing their salvation. We think of the Pharisees and other religious zealots at the time of Christ who took offense at Jesus and demanded his crucifixion.

But he would also cause the rising of many people. Those, like Matthew the tax-collector or the sinful woman who poured perfume on him while he was at the house of Simon the Pharisee, who recognized their sins and their need of forgiveness, Jesus would forgive and lift up. Their righteousness would surpass that of the Pharisees because it would be the righteousness that comes by faith. They would be lifted up to eternal life.

Simeon looks at Mary and says:

And a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:35)

This is no doubt a prophecy of the sorrow that Mary would feel as she would see her son falsely accused, brutally beaten and crucified – all while the leaders of the Jews were jeering at him and rejoicing over his sorrowful death.

What Simeon said regarding how the Jews would receive Jesus also applies also to how our world receives Jesus. And this leads to my next question:

Can anyone be neutral towards the Gospel?

[*Answer:* No, there is no neutrality. Either a person accepts it in faith or rejects it in unbelief. The Jews tolerated Jesus for a time, but then they got really annoyed with his preaching of law and gospel. The same is true today – people will tolerate the Gospel for a while, and after a while they will also get annoyed and speak out against it.]

³⁶ *There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, 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.* (Luke 2:36-37)

When Luke describes Anna as a prophetess, we should not imagine this being her public office (like that of a pastor). Rather it is referring to the spiritual gift of foretelling and forth-telling God's Word that was given to her. Other prophetesses mentioned in the Bible are Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14ff & 2 Chronicles 34:22ff), Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14) and the four daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8, 9).

In all these cases, it seems that these women used the gifts God gave them for the benefit of believers in a God pleasing way. They did not seek public office. They did not try to usurp authority over men and take on roles God did not intend them to have. What they did is serve as examples of faith and zeal in studying the word. They shared their God-given knowledge with others who sought it. They used their gifts to benefit and support those in public offices of leadership.

We can imagine Anna doing the same. This kindly old woman was a model of piety. Her grandmotherly, Christ-centered wisdom and knowledge in the word benefited those who knew her.

Somehow she recognized the Christ. We don't know how, but she did.

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. (Luke 2:38)*

How does Anna serve as an example for Christian women?

[*Answer:* She used her spiritual gifts to point others to the Messiah and give glory to God. She did not begrudge those in leadership, but support them through her prayers, piety and service in the temple.]

The last verse of our text reads:

³⁹ *When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. (Luke 2:39)*

Mary and Joseph were God-fearing believers. They did not let their poverty serve as an excuse not to fulfill all the requirements of the law. Their obedience to God's law placed Jesus under the law in order to be our Savior.

It was only after they had finished everything required of them by the Law that they returned home to Nazareth. Now, we know from the Gospel of Matthew, that Luke is summarizing history here. There were yet a few more events that would take place before Mary and Joseph would return to Nazareth – events that we will learn about next week.

How do Mary and Joseph serve as an example for Christian parents?

[*Answer:* They made sure to do whatever God's word demanded of them regarding their son and themselves. This is an important point for parents to keep in mind. Parents should not send their children to worship – they should bring them. Mary and Joseph did not let their poverty or the inconvenience of what God required of them to prevent them from performing their duties]