

Luke 2:22-52: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 2 verses 22 to 52 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 to the Gentiles and for glory to your 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 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. And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.

She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.

And coming up at that very hour, she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

[1 : 5 9] And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him. Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover.

And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the group, they went a day's journey.

But then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances. And when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, Son, why have you treated us so?

Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress. And he said to them, Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my father's house? And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them.

[3 : 0 5] And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man.

The second half of Luke chapter 2 recounts the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and his visit to the temple as a twelve-year-old. In both cases, Jesus is being associated closely with the temple, which he terms his father's house in verse 49.

We will also see some resemblance with the character of the child Samuel, the descriptions of whose growth Luke has borrowed as his model for describing Jesus and John. We are moving through landmarks of Jesus' infancy and childhood here.

His birth, circumcision, his presentation in the temple, and then later a visit to the temple for Passover at the age of twelve. When we think about a 40-day period at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we might think of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism.

But there is an earlier example of a 40-day period found in this chapter. Jesus was presented in the temple on the 40th day after his birth, according to the law.

[4 : 13] This is grounded upon the commandments of Exodus chapter 13, verses 2, 12 and 15, and also Leviticus chapter 12. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, Those are from Exodus chapter 13, now Leviticus chapter 12.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation she shall be unclean, and on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation, and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.

And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtle dove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her.

Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtle doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering.

[6 : 10] And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean. Mary and Joseph bring two birds for their sacrifices, which seems to be an indication of their poverty. Both Simeon and Anna are elderly.

Simeon is nearing death, and Anna is eighty-four years old. There is an indication of the lengthy time spent in anticipation by Israel here. The new life of Jesus and John, and the hope and the expectation that they bring, is juxtaposed with the hopes of the aged.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are also examples of this, serving to accent the way that the Lord is bringing new life, as it were, from the dead. Another thing to notice is the way that Luke consistently highlights male and female pairings.

We've already had Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and now we have Simeon and Anna. These are different generations. There's the aged pair of Simeon and Anna. There's the late middle-aged couple of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

And then there's the young couple of Mary and Joseph. God's coming salvation is speaking to all generations. In Jesus, God's salvation has already arrived, holding a forty-day-old infant.

[7 : 19] Simeon can say that he has seen God's salvation. Simeon has a profound experience of the Spirit, one that seems ahead of its redemptive historical time. The Holy Spirit is upon him.

The Holy Spirit has revealed to him that he will not die before he sees the Lord's Christ. And then the Spirit brings him into the temple. The sheer extent of the work of the Spirit in the life of Simeon seems to look forward to the time of Pentecost.

This is not the sort of language that we find in the Old Testament that much, but it's something that we see a lot in the book of Acts. The Lord keeps his promise to Simeon, and now he feels able to depart.

We might be reminded of Jacob's response to meeting Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, in Genesis chapter 48. Simeon's prophecy emphasises the fact that Jesus is a light of revelation to the Gentiles.

But his later remarks also make apparent that Jesus will be a deeply divisive figure in the nation of Israel. His song draws very heavily upon the prophecy of Isaiah.

[8 : 21] Isaiah chapter 40 verse 5 Isaiah chapter 42 verse 6 Isaiah chapter 46 verse 13 Isaiah chapter 51 verse 4 to 5 Isaiah chapter 52 verse 10

Isaiah chapter 47 his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. Isaiah chapter 60 verses 1 to 3. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples. But the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph, and he declares that a sword will pierce through Mary's soul also. This seems to be a reference either to the family divisions that she will experience, the fact that some of her own children and some of her relatives will be pulling against Christ, even while she recognizes the truth of his mission, and the nature of his identity. And then there's also the fact that she will experience the suffering as he suffers, as she witnesses her son going through the most intense agony on the cross. A sword will pierce through her own soul also. She enters into the sufferings of her son. Simeon announces that Christ is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel. The order is significant. It's death, followed by resurrection. He will also be a sign that is opposed. Anna comes after Simeon. She's a widow of 84 years old. 84 years? 12 by 7. Two very highly significant numbers. She represents the fullness of Israel. Such details are not given to us by accident. She represents the state of the nation, of the faithful of the nation. She's another

Hannah fasting and praying in the temple, seeking God's salvation. In Simeon and Anna, we see faithful people, exemplary Israelites. In Anna's case, a fact expressed by the symbolism of her age. These people are waiting for the redemption of Israel. They're greeting the newborn saviour as they near death.

They can go to their deaths in peace because they have seen that he has been born. Anna is continually fasting and praying in the temple. And later, the disciples are continually blessing and praising God in the temple. There is a parallel here. After this, they return to the town of Nazareth, where Jesus grows up. And again, the description of Jesus growing up is taken from the example of Samuel.

[11 : 59] We don't have the account of the flight into Egypt here, but that intervenes between these events, presumably. They go down into Egypt and then they decide to move back up to her hometown of Nazareth, rather than settling in Bethlehem, as presumably had been their initial plan.

In the story that follows, Jesus is twelve years old. He journeys with his family to Jerusalem for the Passover. He is lost and then found again after three days. He asks his mother and father, much as he would later ask the two travellers on the road out of Jerusalem to Emmaus, why they didn't understand his true calling.

Why is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my father's business? The angels later ask those at the tomb, why do you seek the living among the dead?

Jesus has to explain his vocation to those who should have understood it. Mary kept all of this in her heart. And I can imagine that looking back upon it twenty years later, she would have marvelled to see Christ's destiny being so clearly and powerfully prefigured in his earlier life. The true significance of the strange and mysterious events that Mary had pondered for over two or more decades would suddenly be revealed following Christ's resurrection.

Once again, at the Passover feast, Jesus would be lost. People would seek for him and he would be found on the third day. The text speaks of the parents going up to Jerusalem for the feast every year, just as Samuel's parents went up to the temple every year. Samuel was left behind in the temple by his parents, being lent to the Lord by his parents. Jesus was accidentally left behind in the temple by his parents, reminding them of his true father, and that he was temporarily lent to them by the Lord.

[13 : 43] 1 Samuel chapter 1 verses 20-28 reads, And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, I have asked for him from the Lord. The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever. Elkanah her husband said to her, Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him, only may the Lord establish his word. So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephor of flour, and a skin of wine, and she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh, and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli, and she said, O my Lord, as you live, my Lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he has lent to the Lord.

And he worshipped the Lord there. The story of Jesus' precocious spiritual wisdom in the temple is reminiscent of the story of Samuel. The description of Jesus growing up in verse 52 also echoes that of Samuel in 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 26.

Samuel is the prophet who ends the old order of Israel. He foretells judgment on the priestly house and establishes the kingdom. Christ declares judgment upon the temple and the priestly house of Israel, ends the old covenant, and establishes the kingdom of God. This is a passage filled with joy and rejoicing, but we're also seeing ominous foreshadowing of the cross. But beyond that, I think we might be seeing foreshadowing of something else. I wonder whether this foreshadows the events of Pentecost. I mentioned in the story of Simeon that there are so many references to the spirit in association with Simeon that it seems like a story out of place. It seems like something that we'd find in the book of Acts. And I don't think that's accidental. 40 days after Jesus' birth, he goes to the temple. 40 days after his resurrection, he enters the heavenly temple.

He ascends into God's presence. We may in fact wonder whether there's a connection between the sacrifices that are offered for the purification and the events of Pentecost. The sacrifice of purification after childbirth involved a dove as a purification offering and an ascension offering of a lamb. Christ is the ascended lamb that goes into God's presence, and the dove of the spirit is that which cleanses the church by faith. Perhaps there's some connection there. I'm not sure, but it's worth looking into. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is only mentioned once in the book of Acts, and that is immediately after the ascension, when she joins the rest of the disciples and they are praying constantly in the upper room in the temple. Perhaps we are supposed to think of some connection with the event of the presentation in the temple. The constancy of Anna in prayer in the temple is similar to the way that the disciples will be constant in prayer after the ascension, and the presence also of Simeon, as one who comes in in the power of the spirit and delivers this speech, may make us think of the one other prominent character in the gospel that Luke refers to as

Simeon, and that is Simon Peter, who is referred to as Simeon in Acts chapter 15. In Luke chapter 2, Simeon prophesies concerning the newborn Jesus. In Acts chapter 2, Simeon Peter preaches and prophesies concerning Christ, the firstborn from the dead. The gospel of Luke has several symmetries, both within itself and in its relationship to the book of Acts. It seems to me that this might well be one of them. A question to consider, what might Simeon have meant by saying that Jesus would be a sign that is opposed, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed?