

Luke

The Gospel for Everyone

Study 16 | Luke 2:22-40

“A Glorious Light”

The occasion for Simeon’s song is the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. There seem to be three events, made necessary by the Old Testament law, that were observed by Mary and Joseph and conflated in Luke’s recounting. First, Leviticus 12:2-6 required the ritual purification of believing Israelite women 40 days after childbirth. Second, the Lord required faithful parents to physically and symbolically present their firstborn male child at the temple as a sort of tithe/ dedication and admission that all they had been given was from Him (cf. Exodus 13:2, 12, 16; 34:19; Numbers 18:15-16; 1 Samuel 1-2). Third, Genesis 17:9-14 required that all male children be circumcised on the eighth day, and Luke 2:27 seems to hint that this is when circumcision was performed on Jesus. So Mary and Joseph made the long trip to Jerusalem in order to faithfully and obediently execute these three obligations related to childbirth placed on them by the Lord in the Old Testament law. Furthermore, we know that their long journey and fulfillment of the law did not come without sacrifice, as the fact of their offering “turtledoves” indicates that they utilized the provisions in the law for the offering of the poor. As they entered the temple they were greeted by an elderly man named Simeon who made ominous declarations and predictions about the miraculous child in their possession.

1. What animated Simeon’s *hope*? What future events do you find yourself hoping for? What ought to chiefly animate a Christian’s hope?

In short, Simeon was hoping for the long-awaited arrival of Israel’s messiah. The promised messiah would do a number of things. We read in Matthew 1:21 that the messiah-baby should be named Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins.” The name Jesus is based on the Hebrew for Joshua and means “the Lord saves” (*Ya shua* = “Yahweh saves”). So the long-ago promised forgiveness of sins would come at the hand of the messiah. In Luke 1:32-33 we read the following about Jesus the messiah: “*He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*” So the messiah would reinstitute the now defunct and destitute kingdom of God, and his reign would last forever. We also read in this passage that the Lord had revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would see this messiah before his death, and that the messiah upon which he was waiting to gaze was “the consolation of Israel”.

The last question is of course expansive, with all sorts of possible applications. But it is helpful to think of hope and Christian hoping—as did Simeon—through the lens of Christ’s coming kingdom. We need to think of Christ’s coming kingdom in two related ways. One, Jesus will bring the full and final restoration of all things in the complete coming of his kingdom to earth at the last day. There will be a new heavens and a new earth and the Lord our God will dwell on the earth in fullness with his people. This is of course our chief and ultimate hope. It may be helpful in correcting current over-emphases, however, to dwell a bit longer on the way Christ’s kingdom has already come and continues to come to us now in history. Jesus inaugurated his

kingdom and launched the new creation in his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, where he now sits at god's right hand, ruling all things in heaven and earth. Though this is not yet known in fullness or experienced in finality before the last day, it is nevertheless really and truly here in incipient form. We can consider at least two ways in which Christ now answers our daily prayer "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." First, the kingdom is most present to us in gathered Christian worship. This is where the body of Christ dwells together in peace, experiences the forgiveness of sins, hears the gospel of the kingdom proclaimed, feasts on and with the Lord. Second, God's kingdom is coming into the world in every place where Christians live obedient lives in the world. As we see justice in the world, mercy shown to others, forgiveness granted between spouses, work done to the glory of God, knowledge of the Lord shared with others, stewardship of the creation, peace and reconciliation overcoming enmity; there we see the now-coming kingdom of God.

2. What particular shape does Simeon's hope take in this passage? How does it change his actions? How should a hope in Christ's coming kingdom take shape in your life during this Christmas season?

Simeon is portrayed in this passage as an elder of Israel, a wise layperson. Though Israel had been in captivity for hundreds of years and for almost as long without Word from the Lord through prophets, Simeon waited expectantly with *faith* in God's promises while not allowing the *sight* of discouraging circumstances to dull his anticipation and hope. Darrell Bock writes, "Saints in touch with god's heart often await expectantly the completion of God's promises. . . . Simeon, like Zechariah and Mary, is expectant that God will deliver Israel. He has not given up believing that God will complete his promise, and his living in light of that hope brings perspective to the present." And so we find him, "righteous and devout," awaiting as the crowning glory of his old life the sight of God's fulfillment of his promises through the messiah. Read Simeon's song and consider his actions. Then discuss what type of godly hopes and affections would stimulate a person to speak and behave as Simeon did.

Where are your affections? Can you imagine finding your ultimate and highest joy in Jesus' coming? If not, why? If so, how and in what ways? How would living in light of such a hope change your speech and behavior?

3. Does Simeon's hope ignore the difficulties of life? Explain. How can we remain hopeful in the face of suffering and disappointment?

After Simeon "sings his song" to Joseph and Mary he gives them some further predictions. Notice how ominous and unhappy some of those predictions are. And remember that Simeon is making this prediction *in the temple*, the place where so many Israelites would indeed "rise and fall" on account of Jesus' ministry. Think of all that happened to Jesus in that temple later in his life as he became an "opposed sign". Consider also Simeon's warning to Mary that "a sword will pierce through your own soul also". Simeon knows for certain that the joyous coming of the messiah will bring with it much hardship and resistance; his hope is not naïve or sentimental. Simeon is simply following the Old Testament prophets (not to mention faithful believers throughout the centuries) in this regard. See the following passages for just a few examples from the scriptures of hope for restoration coupled with warnings of

impending doom: Isaiah 8:14-15; 28:13-16; Luke 20:17-18; 1 Pet 2:6-8. Furthermore, the language of *light* and *glory* in Simeon's song (verse 32) is taken straight from Isaiah 60:1-3 which reads as follows:

**Arise, shine, for your light has come,
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.**

In context the Israelites are being threatened with judgment for their disobedience yet promised a messiah who will suffer on their behalf and bring renewal, forgiveness of sins, and God's everlasting kingdom to all those who put their hope in him. So the Bible in general and Simeon in particular help us to see and live with the tension that for a Christian the prospect of hope, joy, victory, and lasting fulfillment come to us in the midst of impending death, rejection, and hardship. Thus we trust God for his past faithfulness and hope with anticipation for the current and future fulfillment of all his promises even as we lead obedient lives here and now, awaiting the last day when his kingdom will come fully and at last. So it is perhaps fitting to close with these famous words from chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, the whole chapter of which is germane to the final application question: "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.*"