

LUKE 2:22-38

MESSIAH WAS PRESENTED, BUT FEW WERE PREPARED

“When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 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 marvelled 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.”¹

From the Fall of our first parents, God pointed forward to a promised presentation of His Anointed One. Were the prophecies truly so obscure that no one could understand them? Or had people grow jaded as time passed and the routine of life continued uninterrupted? Were people so caught up in the mundane affairs of life that they were incapable of knowing what God was doing? Looking forward to the return of the Son of God, the Master spoke of life in that day. “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulphur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed” [LUKE 17:26-30]. The routine of life continues unimpeded, until God’s timetable is forcibly imposed on mankind.

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Life is too demanding—too stressful—to be overly concerned about the things of God. We are busy people—our busyness demonstrating our importance, or so we imagine. We'll give God whatever time is left over, but that probably won't be much because we have so many things that must be done. We are no different from those who will be living at the time of the Master's return (which could be momentarily). And, we are no different from those who were living at the time God's Son was born of a virgin.

I am always astonished when I consider that the Bible scholars at the time of the Advent of God's Anointed One—men who had spent their entire lives pouring over the Scriptures, failed to take advantage of their knowledge so that they might worship the Son of God. It is as though they were utterly unaware of what was happening. Oh, they knew that God's Anointed One was to be born. They knew the time of His birth and even the place of His birth, but their knowledge failed to prepare them for His coming. It is almost as they could not be bothered to interrupt their important schedules.

Is it really any different today? People are aware that Jesus was born. In fact, the holiday is primarily a celebration of consumption; the celebration is a glorified potlatch promoted by merchants dependent on sales during this month of excess to conclude the year in the black. Even in nations that make no pretence of being Christian, Christmas has become a major mercantile event. The Ginza is brightly lit and decorated with stars and Santas and snowmen. However, despite the fact that the season is putatively a celebration of the birth of the Son of God, few people worship Him! People exchange gifts, drink celebratory eggnog, attend parties, go deeply into debt so their children will not be disappointed and so they will not appear to be cheap—yet, they fail to worship the One for whom the day is named.

Let's look back, before we look forward, to the Advent of God's Son so that we can discover something of God's view of Christmas. Join me in exploring Luke's account of events shortly after Jesus was born. Some were expecting God's Messiah, just as today some are anticipating His return because they experience His glorious presence.

GOD PREPARED FOR THE ADVENT OF HIS SON — The birth of God's Son was repeatedly prophesied throughout the millennia prior to the joyous event. The advent of God's Messiah narrows, and narrows, until it is finer than the point of a spear. A young girl, visited by God's angel, becomes the chosen vessel to bear the Son of God into this world. Think of the prophecies that preceded His birth.

When our first parents had sinned, the LORD God confronted them and the serpent that had deceived Eve. To the serpent, the LORD said:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
He shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise His heel.”

[GENESIS 3:15]

This prophecy is called the Protoevangelium by theologians, because it is the first preaching of the Good News of a deliverer from God. The “Seed of the Woman” shall crush the serpent's head, though He will experience pain as the serpent wounds Him. At the time, the prophecy must have appeared enigmatic, but after the fulfilment of this prophecy it seems abundantly clear that God was pointing forward to the advent of His Son.

The Promised One was to be born of the seed of the woman, and He would be Abraham's child as promised by God when He said to the Patriarch, "All that land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever" [GENESIS 13:15]. The land was promised to Abraham and to his seed forever. The word that is translated "offspring" is the Hebrew word for seed. It is singular, referring to one specific descendant of Abraham. This prophecy points forward to One who will have descended from Abraham.

The lineage of Messiah would be traced through Isaac, through Jacob and through Judah. God pointed to the promised Messiah when He promised Abraham, "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him" [GENESIS 17:19]. Jacob, also, would be included in the lineage of God's Anointed One as God said to Rebekah:

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger."

[GENESIS 25:23]

And of Judah, the prophecy was delivered:

"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples."

[GENESIS 49:10]

That prophecy anticipated another which would be delivered by the rogue prophet Balaam.

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near:
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel;
it shall crush the forehead of Moab
and break down all the sons of Sheth.
Edom shall be dispossessed;
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.
Israel is doing valiantly.
And one from Jacob shall exercise
dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!"

[NUMBERS 24:17-19]

Messiah would be in David's line, sitting on David's throne according to the Word of the Lord. Writing of the LORD's promise—an everlasting covenant—David testified:

"[God] has made with me an everlasting covenant,
ordered in all things and secure.

For will He not cause to prosper
all my help and my desire?"

[2 SAMUEL 23:5]

There is, in the Psalms, an extended statement concerning this divine promise.

"Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said:
 'I have granted help to one who is mighty;
 I have exalted one chosen from the people.
I have found David, my servant;
 with my holy oil I have anointed him,
so that my hand shall be established with him;
 my arm also shall strengthen him.
The enemy shall not outwit him;
 the wicked shall not humble him.
I will crush his foes before him
 and strike down those who hate him.
My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him,
 and in my name shall his horn be exalted.
I will set his hand on the sea
 and his right hand on the rivers.
He shall cry to me, "You are my Father,
 my God, and the Rock of my salvation."
And I will make him the firstborn,
 the highest of the kings of the earth.
My steadfast love I will keep for him forever,
 and my covenant will stand firm for him.
I will establish his offspring forever
 and his throne as the days of the heavens."

[PSALM 89:19-29]

Referring to His royal lineage, though He would be identified as "the LORD's Branch," Messiah would be known as David's Branch [see ISAIAH 4:2; 11:1-5].

Did you ever notice that the lineages provided by Matthew and Luke are not identical? They differ dramatically at a critical juncture. Why are there are two lineages differing in critical detail? The answer to the question is that these two evangelists are tracing the lineage of the Messiah through two different lines and two differing purposes. Matthew traces a lineage that will establish that Jesus has the legal right to the throne of David; whereas Luke will establish that Jesus has the theological right to reign on David's throne.

Matthew provides the paternal genealogy of Jesus, the genealogy through Joseph, his legal father [MATTHEW 1:1-16]. Matthew's genealogy carefully follows the kings of Judah from David through Jeconiah, and then details the descendants of Jeconiah, also known as Coniah or Jehoiachin. God, through Jeremiah, pronounces a curse on Jehoiachin [JEREMIAH 22:24-30]. That curse said no descendent of Jehoiachin would ever again sit upon David's throne, which superficially appears to rule out Messiah ever occupying the throne of His father David.

In comparison with the genealogy Matthew provides, Luke's genealogy differs significantly. It deviates from Matthew's genealogy beginning with David and onward toward Jesus. Careful reading reveals that this genealogy traces David's line through his son Nathan instead of through Solomon. Matthew's genealogy provides the royal lineage. Luke's genealogy provides the lineage that circumvents the curse placed on Jehoiachin.

Note the manner in which Luke begins his genealogy, paying particular attention to the parenthesis. "Jesus ... was ... the son (as was supposed) of Joseph" [LUKE 3:23]. This is the lineage of Jesus through Mary and not through Joseph. Matthew gives the royal lineage of Jesus through Joseph and Luke gives the divine lineage that negates Coniah's curse. Thus, Jesus alone could lay valid claim to the throne of David both by reason of fulfilling the Davidic covenant and through avoiding the curse on Coniah. These facts were a matter of record that would have been known to anyone faintly familiar with the Temple records and the Hebrew Scriptures, which would include every scholar of the Law and would likely have included every Pharisee.

Moreover, scholars of that day would have known the place of Messiah's birth, for Micah had written of that birth:

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

[MICAH 5:2]

The scholars quoted this verse to Herod when he asked where the King of the Jews was to be born. Queried by the scheming king, the scholars did not need to confer. Immediately, they quoted Micah's prophecy [see MATTHEW 2:6].

The scholars also should have known the time of Messiah's advent, for Daniel had written of His coming. DANIEL 9:20-27 is a detailed chronology of Messiah's coming. Daniel's reference to the "going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem" [VERSE 25] refers to the last of four decrees that were made by Persian rulers in reference to the Jews. This decree was issued by Artaxerxes Longimanus on March 5th, 444 B.C. [cf. NEHEMIAH 2:1-8]. After *seven weeks* and *sixty-two weeks*, or 483 years, Messiah would be cut off. This period concluded on the day of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem just before Christ was *cut off*. In other words, Jewish scholars had to have known that Messiah's presence was at hand, for He would shortly be "cut off." That is, they had to have known—if they believed the Word of God.

At issue is whether the Bible anticipated the coming of Messiah, predicting His lineage, the place of His birth and the timing of His birth, or whether these matters are issues of interpretation or even response generated in later days after claims concerning His presence. Even the more virulent, antagonistic anti-Christian is compelled to admit that the Old Testament scriptures were completed long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Though people opposed to the Christian Faith may question the accuracy of the interpretations, the fact that such prophetic writings existed cannot be denied.

What is vital for us as believers in the Son of God is that not only the details of His birth were provided, but the purpose of His coming was available to anyone even modestly conversant with the Old Testament writings. The Son of God would be born to provide atonement for sinful man. He would be born so that He might provide His life as a sacrifice for sinful man.

GOD PRESENTED HIS SON — The presentation of Jesus at the Temple provides astonishing insight into the character of the times. After the birth of the Saviour in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph presented Him in the Temple, as required under the Law. They brought the required sacrifice, together with the babe. The act was so pedestrian, so ordinary, that it drew no attention from those hurrying about conducting business within the Temple precincts.

However, as they were engaged in fulfilling their responsibility, a man entered the Temple, nor was his entrance happenstance. This man, Simeon by name, was prompted by the Spirit of God to go to the Temple at that precise time, for he was anticipating the revelation of God's Messiah. Focus on the text, where we read that he entered the Temple "in the Spirit." Of this man it is written that "the Holy Spirit was upon Him." In fact, he had received a revelation "by the Holy Spirit." The revelation was that he would not die before he had seen God's Anointed One—the Christ of God.

I can only surmise that though the Spirit of God indeed informed him, the method was in some way connected to the fact that the information was evident in what had been written. Undoubtedly, you will recall that the "Word of God" is identified as "the Sword of the Spirit" [EPHESIANS 6:17]. God identifies His words so closely with His Spirit that He says through Isaiah, "My Spirit that is upon you, and My words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring" [ISAIAH 59:21]. The Spirit of God superintended those who wrote the Word of God so that the very mind of God is revealed through what is written. Moreover, the Spirit of God brings to remembrance the will of God as He works even in our lives [cf. JOHN 14:15-26].

Therefore, it seems appropriate that Simeon had read the Word and understood from the very verses we have cited that the time of Messiah's birth was near. Thus sensitive to what the Spirit of God had caused to be written and guided by the Spirit who superintends His Word, Simeon entered the Temple. His entrance coincided with Mary and Joseph who were there at that precise moment, bringing the child to present the sacrifices required by the Law. Seeing them, and seeing the child, Simeon was moved by the Spirit of God to approach them.

The account includes a beautiful human touch as we witness this man reaching out in that way older people have of asking permission to hold the baby, to which Mary gave assent. Taking the babe in his arms, Simeon praised God. We know the content of his praise.

"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."

[LUKE 2:29-32]

No wonder the child's "father and mother marvelled at what was said about Him." This child had induced a wonderfully joyous outburst at the thought of His presence among men. Nor was this outburst from just any individual passing through the Temple courts. It was delivered by a man recognised as righteous and devout, one who was clothed with the Spirit of God. When a man such as Simeon speaks, we should listen! When one speaks who lives for the unveiling of God's Messiah, should we not listen?

Simeon then blessed Joseph and Mary. The blessing Simeon delivered was no doubt because of Joseph and Mary's obedience to the will of the Lord. In their obedience, they were kindred hearts with those who seek the glory of the Lord God. The blessing of God, however, is not always without pain to the flesh. Assuredly, Joseph knew pain in obedience to God. Bearing the stigma of marrying a woman who was pregnant before the wedding, Joseph no doubt felt the sting of small-town censure for the rest of his life.

As Simeon blessed the youthful couple, no doubt Joseph wondered about the blessing. The words Simeon spoke to Mary, though they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, must surely have cast a shadow over her soul as she listened. "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" [LUKE 2:34, 35]. The child would be the cause of the rising of many—common fishermen would be exalted before the Lord, and tax collectors and prostitutes would experience the forgiveness of sin. The child would also be the cause of the falling for many in Israel—the nobility of Israel would stumble at His presence; the religious leadership of the nation would be exposed as blind to the presence of God.

This rising and falling would not be without cost to Mary herself, for a two-edged sword would pierce her own soul. One of the most tender and most wrenching scenes played out at the cross is presented in poignant words by the Apostle John. "Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" [JOHN 19:25-27].

Before the salvation of which Simeon spoke should be revealed, this child must die. Before He would be seen as a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" and for "glory to ... Israel," this child must die. The child would die a premature death, a most unnatural death on a cruel cross; His own would not receive Him. The Christmas message is a message of sacrifice that precedes life and light. The death of Christ is the forgotten purpose of His Advent. This sacrifice is the message neglected and forgotten in this day so late in the Age of Grace.

It is not a dark thing to speak of the sacrifice of Jesus the Son of God at this time. It is not morbid and gloomy to make mention of His sacrifice for sin at Christmastide. We know that it is by His death that our sin is put away. By the Master's sacrifice, God has provided the means to approach Him without condemnation and without guilt. Had death been the final chapter of the story of the Son of God, it would indeed be a dark matter to speak of that death regardless of the timing of the discussion. His death was not the end of the story, however.

"After the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.' So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me'" [MATTHEW 28:1-10].

The birth of Jesus heralds the Good News that I may receive the divine gift of life. My sin need not condemn me, for the Son of God was born to die in my place. I need no longer fear God, for I can now stand before Him, holy and righteous in Christ His Son. By faith in the Risen Son of God, I now live. I need not understand the physiology of the New Birth to experience this glorious transformation. I need but believe this great Good News, that God became a man that He might die, the just for the unjust. Now by faith in Him, my sin can be put away and I can be forever free from all condemnation and cleansed from all unrighteousness.

How true is that word which Paul has penned. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:1-10].

GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THE SECOND ADVENT OF HIS SON — There was another individual present that day when Joseph and Mary presented the child at the Temple. That old woman was eighty-four years old, and she had dedicated herself to fasting and prayer for many years. What did she pray for? We can't say with precision, but it is reasonable to accept that she also was waiting for the revelation of God's Anointed One. For coming at that very hour “she began to give thanks to God and to speak of [Jesus the Messiah] to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

She began to speak of “the redemption of Jerusalem.” She was anticipating God's promised deliverance of His people. She understood the necessity of sacrifice in order to accomplish the redemption of God's people; however, she was looking forward and beyond the tomb to what would be accomplished through His sacrifice. She prayed for the peace of Jerusalem, which would only be accomplished through the redemption of Jerusalem. I cannot help but believe that she looked forward to the reign of the Messiah and the peace that would accompany His rule.

The writer of the Hebrew Letter, pondering the First Advent of the Saviour, cites the Psalmist when he writes:

“When Christ came into the world, he said,

‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
Then I said, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.”’”

[HEBREWS 10:5-7]

Indeed, Christ was born to provide sacrifice; but His sacrifice always looks forward to what is accomplished through that death. Of that sacrifice we read, “[Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.’ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world.”

Now, focus on what is accomplished through His death. “[Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” [HEBREWS 9:15-28].

This same Jesus who was born to die will come again; and when He comes the second time, He will bring salvation—the redemption of Jerusalem. This is what Anna, the aged prophetess, prayed for; this is the anticipation that motivated fasting and prayer. This is the hope of Christmas for all who look to the Master.

God extends a generous offer through His Word. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Life, the forgiveness of sin, peace with Him, hope—all are offered through faith in this One who was born to give His life as a sacrifice. It is not in believing that He died that one is saved; it is in looking to the Risen, Living Son of God that salvation is given. All who look to Him in faith are saved. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

My prayer is that you have believed this message and that you have the testimony of God’s Spirit that you possess this life offered in the Son of God. The surest evidence that you possess this life is that you are obedient to the revealed will of God—that you long to do what He commands. To be godly, to be righteous, to endeavour to honour Him, to rejoice in His presence and in working together with His holy people—this is the evidence of His salvation. Have you believed? Have you obeyed His first call to identify with Him since you believed?

When many, even to this day, miss the presence of God’s promised Deliverer, do not permit yourself to be ignorant of His presence. Believe the message of life; receive the Son of God as Master over your life. In Him is found all that the human heart longs for; in Him alone will life be found. Believe Him and be saved. This is the invitation of God to all who will receive Him. Do it today; do it now. Amen.