

Born That Man Might Die in Peace

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to the scriptures now, and our reading this morning is in Luke's Gospel, page 857 in the Blue Church Bibles, and Simeon's great song, the last great festive song of Luke's Gospel, chapter 2.

I'll be reading from verse 21 down to verse 40. Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, verse 21.

And to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves 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.

[1 : 35] 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 the thoughts of 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 84. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping and fasting and praying night and day.

[3 : 06] 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 performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, into their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him.

Amen. This is God's word to us, and may he bless it to us this morning. Well, do you have a seat and open up Luke's gospel again to page 857, chapter 2, verse 21.

For me, there was one picture this year which perfectly summed up that depressing early January feeling, and it was the poor Christmas tree downstairs in the Lomond room last Sunday morning. It was still three days away from Epiphany when good British Christmas trees can retire with dignity, but already this one had gone the way of all flesh. The branches had all drooped, and little plastic baubles had slipped off onto the floor, and the needles had gone the color of dried-out mustard.

[4 : 37] But most depressing of all, some poor apprentice had been trying desperately to hold up the trunk of this tree with sellotape. And sometime over Christmas, the tape had given up the ghost, so that the top two feet just dangled off to the side.

It's utterly depressing. You know that Christmas is dead and buried, don't you? When you come into church on a Sunday morning and you see that, one picture that sums up what I feel like by mid-January.

Even if my American wife lets me keep the tree up till the twelfth day, the time came this week to cram the remains into the brown bin, and it feels like putting the final nail in the festive coffin.

All that's left are the bills and the unwanted toys that you'll trip over until sometime next November. And possibly that slightly cynical feeling that really all of it was a bit of a charade, something that we

just put on for the kids.

Well, Luke's gospel has the perfect antidote to those January blues, because in chapter 2, verse 22, his story leaps forward 40 days from that first Christmas night, and his final explanation of Jesus' birth isn't delivered by a bunch of shepherds or a choir of angels.

[6 : 00] It's not left to the children or the sentimental parents. No, it's a godly old man called Simeon and Anna, 84 years a widow.

You see, in Luke's gospel, it's the old folk who know what counts once all the glitz of Christmas has faded away. It's not the nursery where the genuine excitement is.

No, it's the nursing home. Because the most precious thing that Jesus brought us is something a young child will simply never really see the value of.

The longer you've lived, though, the more you might cherish this gift. Notice both Simeon and Anna have spent their whole lives waiting for something.

Waiting, verses 25 and 38, for consolation, redemption. And now they've seen it, or rather seen him.

[7 : 03] Simeon can sing about the one Christmas gift which lasts well beyond December. And that is the gift of peace. Peace both in this life and crucially at its end.

Year after year we sing that Jesus was born, that man no more may die. And yet year after year we see Christians we love facing death.

We fear the same stark ending as everyone else, don't we? So here's a postscript to Christmas for the grown-ups. And it's a much more rich, immediate comfort that Simeon sees.

Christ was born that man might die in peace. Well, we're going to work at this message from the outsides in, because I'm sure you've noticed already that the outsides of this passage have a lot in common.

First, there's a message from Luke about the baby himself. The son presented for sacrifice. And then a little further in we'll meet our two excitable oldies, the saints waiting for peace.

[8 : 22] And again, they both have a similar message. And then finally in the middle, verses 33 to 35, there's a challenge about the nature of this baby's destiny.

He's a sign sent to search our hearts. So first the son. And just notice how quickly Luke shifts his attention away from the stable and onto the temple.

After all that build-up, the facts of Jesus' birth were dealt with in just seven little verses. And at verse 22, we've leapt forward about six weeks to the time when, under Jewish law, Mary would be purified after giving birth.

And if you read either the first or the last paragraph of our passage, you can't help but notice something, can you? Something which seems slightly odd and incidental to us, but was obviously very important to Luke.

He's desperate to show us how right from his infancy, this baby Christ was obedient to God's law. All the focus here on the beginning and the end is on the temple and fulfilling the demands of Moses.

[9 : 40] Because Luke knows that gazing down at a cute little baby wriggling in the straw won't explain what Jesus was all about.

Now for that, we need to look at the altar place, the temple. He wasn't just the babe in the manger, but the son presented for sacrifice.

That, I think, is the message of the beginning and the end of this passage, verses 22 to 28. And then verses 39 to 40, the son presented for sacrifice.

Do you notice how often that little phrase, according to the law, gets repeated here? At first, it seems a rather abstract historical detail, butting in on the Christmas story.

But as we'll see, this little child's commitment to God's law will be central to his destiny. So Luke labors the point for us.

[10 : 40] He's circumcised, verse 21, on the eighth day as the law commanded. His parents come to Jerusalem to obey two of God's commands.

First to purify Mary after her childbirth, verse 24. And so they offer what the law allowed for a poor family, a pair of pigeons. But there's a second command to obey, and that's for their son, Jesus.

Every firstborn son, verse 23, rightfully belonged not to his parents, but to the Lord himself. It was a tradition which went back thousands of years to the time God rescued his people from terrible slavery in Egypt.

And ever since that day, when a first son was born, their parents would sacrifice a lamb to redeem him. It was an acknowledgement that he belonged to God's grace.

This time, though, it's more than just honoring a tradition, isn't it? If we've been reading Luke, we'll know that this firstborn son belongs to God already. He's his son.

[11 : 49] And God's claim on this little child will go far further than his claim on any other firstborn. In fact, as we'll see later in verse 35, God's claim on this son will be incredibly costly.

There's a bit of sweetness to his birth. He makes the angels sing and his mother weep. And that destiny, the cross, will require him to be totally blameless under the law.

Innocent. And so right from the start, Jesus' life was focused on the temple, the place of atonement.

Because this baby boy was born to be presented to God, a sacrifice on behalf of his people.

He was born to be the spotless holy lamb whose death would take away their sin. That's the grown-up truth about his birth, that Luke is so determined to drive home.

Just look at how he sums it up in verses 39 to 40. They did everything, he says, everything according to the law. And the child grew and became strong, and he knew God's favor.

[13 : 08] Right from the start, his life was an acceptable sacrifice for his people's sin. Right from his birth, in every respect, this baby lived the way his people had failed to live.

So that he could die the way you and I deserve to die. It's the one Christmas truth that we cannot sentimentalize away.

Maybe that's why one of my favorite carols never gets sung much at Christmas time. Its message just seems a bit too brutal for December when we're all soppy and sentimental.

This little babe so few days old is come to rifle Satan's fold. All hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold do shake.

A vulnerable, shivering child born to die, born to rifle Satan's fold. There's no denying something slightly chilling in Luke's message.

[14 : 19] Glorious yet brutal. And for these two elderly believers who we'll meet next, that is what made Christ's birth the richest thing of all. Well, we've met the son, presented for sacrifice, and then come Simeon and Anna, the saints, waiting for peace.

Two people who've been longing to see this savior all their lives. Simeon comes first, and in verses 29 to 32, he sings the last of Luke's festive songs.

We call it the Nunc Demittus today. It's still sung every night in the posh churches. Now you can dismiss me, Lord. That's what it means. It's a song of someone who's ready to die.

A song celebrating the end of his long wait for the consolation of Israel. The person God had promised to comfort his people.

Anna was waiting for the same thing, wasn't she? Redemption, she calls it, down at the end. Here are two deeply religious people, always in the temple, but both of them have been longing for something more.

[15 : 33] We're told in verse 25 that Simeon was a righteous and devout man. And that doesn't mean that he was self-righteous. It just means that his religion was put in the right place.

It led him to long for God's Christ. Living faith is longing for God to do what he's promised to do.

And God had revealed something wonderful to old Simeon. He told him that he wouldn't die, verse 26, until he'd met his Messiah. Well, one day, in the temple courts, he sees a little baby.

And of course, to you and me, all babies look the same, don't they? I've spent as long as any father gazing lovingly at my children. But the truth is, even I can't tell them a pass in a baby photo.

But do you notice three times Luke mentions that the Holy Spirit is leading Simeon? It's a little reminder that what Simeon is about to see and say comes with all the authority of God.

[16 : 38] He sees a little baby and he knows without a doubt that this is him. This is the one I've been longing for. And so in a beautifully tender moment, he takes this little child into his arms and this old man sings the happiest song of his life.

Verse 29, Lord, I'm ready to die. I've met the one you sent as my sacrifice of peace. In fact, how wonderful is this?

I'm clinging to him right now. And now you've done what you promised. I'm ready. Now what gave Simeon the ability to talk like that?

Because I don't think many of us, if we're honest with ourselves, feel quite so comfortable with the idea of death. Well, I don't think it's because Simeon had superhuman courage or extra strong faith.

There's a danger that we can make all our examples seem a bit superhuman, just a bit out of reach. John Harper, for example, he's a man who died with extraordinary courage.

[17 : 55] The man our friends at Harper Church are named after, in fact. You see, Harper drowned with the Titanic. And as the ship went down, he was helping to organize the life rafts.

And he was heard on the decks in those last few hours crying out for the women and children and the unconverted to get into the boats.

But not himself. When one man refused to hear the gospel, Harper pled with this man to take his own life jacket because he knew that this man needed it more.

Harper was ready to meet his God and this man wasn't. Now that is extraordinary courage in the face of death, isn't it? And to some extent, yes, every Christian should be able to think about death very differently.

But Simeon isn't really saying that the idea of dying no longer makes him afraid. His message isn't superhuman. It's a message of relief.

[19 : 03] He's saying that he's seen with his own eyes the big turning point in all eternity. And if God had made this moment happen at last, then he knew he could leave the rest of eternity to God as well.

He could trust him. trust him to keep his promises for Israel and for the world and even trust him with his own death. You see, really what Simeon is singing about here is a massive change in history.

The whole focus of this passage is on a new age being brought about by this little child. The age Simeon and Anna have spent their lives waiting for.

Just notice all the little signals that a new age has begun here. First, there's the name Simeon uses for this child. What's he call him in verse 30? Your salvation.

Here's the one the prophets have promised to bring in that messianic kingdom at long last. Then verse 32, notice. Notice who he's come for.

[20 : 12] He's a light not just for Israel but a light to show all of us what God is like. He's come to open the door to this new age when the Gentiles are welcomed into God's kingdom.

But Israel aren't forgotten are they? No. He's glory for them. Now's the moment at last when God's glory returns to his temple.

Just what the prophets promised. God's glory is this little baby. And just notice the odd little detail were given about Anna. She's an 84-year-old widow from the tribe of Asher.

A vanished tribe lost in exile years ago. But wasn't that another great promise of this kingdom age? That Israel would be restored, put back together.

The widow's comfort is. It's not just the arrival of a child that he's singing about. It's the arrival of the end. of heaven breaking in here on earth.

[21 : 19] When the fullness of time had come said Paul God sent forth his son born of a woman born under the law to redeem those under the law under God's curse that all of us might receive adoption.

That's what Simeon sees. He sees that the fullness of time has come the great pivot in all of eternity and that's why he's ready. Not because he had some superhuman extra courageous faith.

Just because he'd seen the one that meant everything would be okay. All of history would pan out the way God had promised. He'd met the one he was waiting for.

And that is the only thing that can make you ready for death. Now you and I are waiting for a slightly different age aren't we than old Simeon and Anna but just like them we are waiting for something.

That's what the life of faith has always been. It's a life of waiting and we are waiting for the ends of this age that Simeon and Anna saw ushered in. We're waiting for the fulfillment of everything this passage began.

[22 : 34] The day that Jesus returns. to wipe away every tear. But you see what they saw guarantees the thing that we're waiting for.

I wonder if you've ever sat by a dying friend and heard them say something like I'd just love to see in one last Christmas.

There's something about that time of year which we long to see again isn't there? But actually it's this first Christmas that we need to point each other towards.

It's because of this first Christmas that we can have peace now. In life we can know that God is not against us. He's dealt with our sin.

But above all even at life's end if we're holding tight to this Christ like old Simeon then we can know that we're ready to meet our God.

[23 : 35] And that is a peace which can never disappoint. So often the things we look forward to seem cheap and tinsely once it's all over don't they?

Like the gifts inside a cracker. But this never ever will. Now it won't take away all the fear of dying. Sometimes you hear Christians talk like that don't you?

And it just makes you feel guilty if you're different. We still have to face death and the process of dying is never easy. There's nothing wrong with being a little bit scared of that.

But the fear of dying is a very different thing to the fear of death. What Simeon found was a much more real believable peace.

He was released from his long wait knowing that death itself had lost its terror. He knew that there wasn't a drop of anger or punishment lying beyond it.

[24 : 38] And anyone who's taken this child into their heart is ready to face death that way. That is the real grown-up message of his coming.

But of course it must also be true that if you haven't met this child, God, then you're not prepared for death. You cannot find real peace without him.

And there are certain things you just don't do unless you're prepared, aren't they? You don't leave it until December 24th to think about your wife's present, or at least if you made that mistake this year, you won't make it again next year.

You don't go in for major surgery without writing a will. You just don't do it. You're not prepared. And you don't risk dying without the Lord Jesus to make you right with your maker.

To live like that is a life without peace and a death without heaven. In fact, it's a living and dying hell. A few years ago, I heard something about end-of-life care, which I found very surprising.

[25 : 51] And as a Christian, I found rather worrying. It was a discussion about a study of terminal cancer patients that had been published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

And this paper had been looking into those patients who used prayer as a means of helping them cope. But what I found so unsettling was that these religious people were more likely, more likely, to resort to desperate, life-prolonging intervention, religion, in their final days.

They just were not ready to die. You can be very religious, but not at real peace. You can be a regular churchgoer, but never actually cling to Jesus himself, or at least your hold on him isn't as tight as the grasp you try to hold on to life with.

And of course, you can also be a complete atheist and just give up on life. Be so weary of the struggle and the discomfort that you simply want it all to end out of nothing more than indifference. And that's not real peace either, is it? But Simeon and Anna here, they have clearly lived their lives to the full. Both of them were utterly devout, always in the temple, but it wasn't that which made them ready, was it?

[27 : 20] It was seeing Christ for themselves. That's what their religion was all about, waiting for God to keep his promises. The sun presented for sacrifice, the saints waiting for peace.

And finally, right in between the voices of these two elderly believers comes the most pointed moment in this passage. And verses 33 to 35, face us with the challenge that Jesus Christ presents us.

This little unassuming child is the sign sent to search our hearts. Mary and Joseph, verse 33, they marvel at what Simeon has to say about their son.

But that marvelous wonder of Christmas would come at a marvelous cost. heart. So before Simeon's duty is done, he has to warn Mary.

It'll be as if a sword pierces her own soul. For her son to achieve this salvation, she'll have to give him up.

[28 : 31] He's a baby bound for the cross, right from the cradle. And that great destiny will shape the future of not just Mary and Simeon and Anna, but every one of us sitting here this morning.

He's appointed, says Simeon, for the rising and falling of many in Israel. For some, just like Simeon, he truly would meet the hopes and fears of all their years.

but for others, he'd be their downfall. A sign, verse 34, who came to be opposed. Fine for Christmas, but someone to stick back up in the attic when it's all over, along with the tinsel and the artificial tree.

You see, that light which shows all of us what God is like also shows each one of us what we are like. On the inside, he reveals the thoughts of many hearts, verse 35.

And it's like that, isn't it, with the things you love and you hate? It shows up what we're like, what we hide away deep inside us, who you fall for, or who you vote for, or who you hire.

[29 : 50] All of that says something about you, doesn't it? And it's just the same with what you do with this Christ. Christ. His coming is the event which defines every last one of us.

Some of us will recognize it as the most precious thing of all. And like Anna in verse 38, we'll have to tell people about it in our excitement. But not everyone will welcome him.

that's why probably some of you were disappointed this week. If you've been busy inviting friends along to Christianity Explored, and maybe on Thursday night you never heard back.

That happens sometimes, doesn't it? It's hard to keep on inviting people when that happens. But not everyone wants this child. Jesus is a sign to be opposed, a light that many want to shut out.

And there's no use trying to hide the embarrassment of that. Luke doesn't. But I guess Anna just thought that compared to the peace she'd found in Christ, it was worth a bit of disappointment and a bit of laughter.

[31 : 04] So wasn't this wonderful? After decades of patient, faithful waiting, she used her twilight years to point men and women to the Lord Jesus.

What an example this woman is. Or maybe you've spent many years waiting for God's promise. Years of living the Christian life at first with enthusiasm and then with endurance and then most recently through gritted teeth.

Struggling to make it out to church. Struggling to get excited at Christmas time when it's all the young families in full swing. But you're feeling more and more alone.

The wait for consolation isn't easy, is it? The Christian life can be long and hard. So let's take heart from old Simeon and Anna, two faithful saints who waited and waited and found real peace in Jesus Christ.

Two lives lived in reverse. All their joy came right at the end. And that message to us is that we can trust their Savior with those things we fear most of all.

[32 : 26] He was born that we might die in peace. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this most precious gift of all.

The gift of peace through the Son you loved and sent for us. So help us, Lord, like these patient old saints to end our lives well in the trust of your dear Son.

That the hopes and fears of all our years might be met in his cross and his coming again. For we ask it in Jesus' strong name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.