

Nunc Dimittis – Joy for the Hopeful: Simeon’s Song

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[0 : 0 0] Christmas songs are everywhere, but of course that's not a new phenomenon that's been so right from the very beginning. The birth of Jesus was surrounded by song, songs on the lips of people who understood what was happening and rejoiced in the birth of the Savior of the world.

And it could hardly be otherwise, could it? When God himself came into our world, it's bound to be surrounded by song and trumpeted by music. Listen to what Martin Luther, the great Protestant performer, said about music. Next to the word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, our minds, our hearts, and spirits.

Our dear fathers, the prophets did not desire without reason that music be always used in the churches. Hence, we have so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God. He goes on to add this, a person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God must be a clodhopper indeed and doesn't deserve to be called a human being. He should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs. Well, you know where you are with Martin Luther. He tells it pretty straight, doesn't he?

But he's right. And we've been looking this Christmas at some of the songs of those that were recorded by Luke in his gospel from the lips of those who surrounded the birth of Jesus and its announcement.

We've looked at Mary's Magnificat. We've looked at Zechariah's Benedictus. Last night, we listened to the Gloria in Excelsis Deo that was sung by the angels. And now this morning on Christmas Day, we're going to look together at what's known as the Nunc Dimittis, the words of old Simeon. Although, in fact, although Simeon gets the credit, actually it is something of a duet because another aged saint joins in, Anna the prophetess. So if you look on page two of your programs, you'll see the reading there from Luke chapter two. And we're going to read this together.

[2 : 2 6] 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's 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 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. And he came in the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought 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've prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

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 84 or perhaps for 84 years, she did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour, she began to give thanks to God and speak to him, speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Extraordinary words, aren't they? What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping? Well, let's ponder that as we listen to Joel singing this lovely carol that asks that question. Do look at that passage in Luke chapter two again, that's on your sheets, where we read these words and they're the song of not just one, but of two hopeful pensioners, two aged saints who are waiting for the savior.

Simeon and Anna actually had two things in common. First of all, they were both old. We don't know exactly Simeon's age, but clearly he was an old man who was expecting his departure wasn't far off.

[5 : 29] But Anna, we're told was at least 84. Verse 37 there, but there's an alternative reading in the footnote. And if that's correct, she had been a widow for 84 years after being married for seven years. So if you got married, say at the age of 16, that means she would be in fact at least 107.

And somebody was telling me the other day about a friend of theirs who was fit and hale and hearty at the age of 103. And they got a letter from the GP clinic to come to a wellness clinic, which very wisely they sent back and said, no, thank you very much. I'm very well. And I'm on no drugs at all.

And that's why I'm 103. So I'm keeping well away from you. But whether Anna was 84 or 107, she was in very good voice. And she and Simeon were both elderly saints. But more importantly, they were both people of faith and hope. That is, they were true believers in God and his promises. Verse 25 there says that Simeon was righteous and devout. That's what Luke said of old Zechariah and Elizabeth in chapter 1. That is, they were godly people. They were devoted to God's commands and his ways.

But look at what being devoted to God's law really means in the second half of verse 25. It means that they were looking to God alone for their salvation. They were waiting for the consolation of Israel, for the promised salvation that the whole of the law and the prophets was all about.

Very important to grasp that very clearly because the Old Testament faith was exactly that. It was faith in the promise of God's coming Savior. And so people of faith were waiting for that day.

[7 : 22] And they were showing their true faith by their living in obedience to God's command for their lives. The hope in their hearts for God was visible in the obedience of their bodies to God.

And that's always the mark of true faith according to the Bible. It's visible, isn't it, in lives of submission to God's word. That's why Paul calls it the obedience of faith. So here are two elderly saints. They're faithful, they're obedient to God in life, and they're longing for salvation to be revealed. Wouldn't that be a great thing for people to say of you and me if we live to 84 or even to 107?

These are faithful, obedient people. And that's why, if you look at verse 25, it says that the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon. Acts chapter 5, verse 33 tells us that God gives his Spirit to those who obey him.

And Luke's account actually has been full of the Holy Spirit, full of the Holy Spirit. In fact, long before the day of Pentecost, Luke's telling us about all sorts of people who were filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came on Mary as she conceived Jesus the Savior. The Spirit came on John the Baptist in the womb. And that led his mother to realize that Mary was indeed carrying the Messiah.

The Holy Spirit opened Zechariah's mouth, remember, so that he could speak after his dumbness, and he sang all about the Savior. And you see now here, verse 26 and 27, the Holy Spirit had spoken to Simeon about Jesus the Savior, and then he'd led Simeon to Jesus the Savior, right into his presence in the temple. And that's always the mark of the work of the Holy Spirit. He speaks of Jesus, he reveals Jesus, and he leads people to a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus. And that's what he did for old Simeon.

[9 : 22] And that's what he's still doing today, all over the world. It's what he's doing this very morning, as we listen to the words of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. And they've been preserved for us, so that these same words may lead us into an encounter with the Savior. Verse 27 tells us that Jesus' whole family was guided by the Scripture, the words of the law. They followed God's word obediently. And their obedience to God's law was the Holy Spirit's way of leading them into truth.

And wherever people seek God's word in the Scripture, the Holy Spirit is leading them into an encounter with Jesus the Messiah. And you see what happens. When the Holy Spirit's words speak about Jesus and lead to Jesus and reveal Jesus, then people receive Jesus with great joy. Verse 28, Simeon took Jesus in his arms, and he blessed God. And Simeon's song is a song all about receiving Jesus. It's about what it means to welcome Jesus as the wonderful, long-promised Savior. And Simeon, with Anna's help at the end, in her little encore, he tells us, I think, four things about what it means to welcome Jesus personally. The first thing that Simeon tells us in his song about welcoming Jesus as Savior is that it is for him, first of all, a reception of peace. To receive Jesus personally as the Savior means to be a sharer in the peace of the gospel. Verse 29, now you are letting your servant depart in peace. Now that's not a vague or a sentimental thing he's talking about. He's speaking very clearly, very practically, in at least two senses. First, he's saying that it brings an extraordinary contentment about our earthly life and existence. For Simeon, whatever his material lack may have been, whatever his world he wants, whatever his aging bodily deficiencies, for him to see God's salvation, to know personally God's Savior was enough. And any regrets that he has about his life, they seem to be totally swept away. And he's telling us he needs nothing more, not ever. He can depart this world in peace. Utter contentment about our earthly life. That's a great contrast, isn't it, to what we see all around us today in our consumer society, perhaps maybe especially at Christmas time. It's full of discontent, insatiable desires, cravings, wants. It's all around us, especially in all the advertising propaganda at Christmas.

All the papers in the next few days, they'll be full of things you must do in 2024. But Simeon says, no, there's nothing. Nothing else you must do. There's one thing you must do. And that is to find true contentment. Take Jesus Christ in your arms, as he did, and welcome him. And that's enough. And what he's saying to us is that is the way to real peace and contentment in this earthly life. And many Christians, you know, even can become very blighted by discontent. Perhaps because they don't have a place that they crave.

They don't have a particular position they want. Maybe they don't have the particular person that they want to love. There are all kinds of things, aren't there, that can make us very bitter and discontented in life. But perhaps we need to learn from Simeon to welcome the Savior again as all that we need. And to find the peace, the joy that only he can give us. Peace. There's real contentment about life. That's something very valuable, isn't it? But secondly, also, Simeon speaks perhaps even more importantly about peace as a real absence of fear about death. I can depart in peace, he says.

I can face the grave with no dread, with no fear, because, he says in verse 30, my eyes have seen your salvation. And that is the peace, isn't it, that belongs to those who have truly welcomed the Savior Jesus. That's why we sing, good Christian men, rejoice. Now ye need not fear the grave, because Jesus Christ has come to save. As a pastor, I often speak with people whose death is near, and who know that the death is near. And the joy in speaking to real Christians is that they don't have fear. They have peace because they have embraced the Lord Jesus Christ, just as Simeon did. And they too have known that reception of real peace. But it was more than that even for Simeon, because he says also that in seeing Jesus was a revelation of God's purpose to him. Look at verse 30. My eyes have seen your salvation that you've prepared in the presence of all peoples as a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

[14 : 47] To welcome Jesus as Savior means to become a sharer in the purpose of the gospel of God. And it's to see the story of this whole world finds its meaning, finds all its answers, in Jesus the Savior. Jesus Christ brings real meaning, real peace to our personal world, but it brings more than that. It brings light and glory to the whole of world history, past, present, and future. Simeon was a true believer. You see, he knew that God is God of all the earth.

And he knew that God's purpose of salvation was for all the nations, the whole world, not just for Israel. And now he sees that all God's saving revelation for all nations is found in this one who at last has come, Jesus of Nazareth. Verse 31, he is the salvation revealed in the presence of all peoples.

Verse 32, he is a light of revelation of the one true God to, do you see, the Gentiles, the nations of this world as well as Israel. That is the light of revelation to Middle Eastern Jews today and Middle Eastern Arabs today. And people of Muslim background and Buddhist background and Asian animist background and Western secularist background. All the nations.

Many people in our, in our Western society don't see that. They think that if there are any gods at all, well, there must be many gods, or at least the many just different ways to the same God.

But no, no, no. Simeon's great revelation here is that in this child is the way and the truth and the life. The revelation of God, the salvation of God, the only true God and the only true salvation.

[16 : 43] He is the heart and the focus of the whole of the purpose of this universe. And anybody who is led, as Simeon was, by the light of the Holy Spirit to welcome Jesus, as Simeon did, anybody immediately comes to understand that.

Not only does their own life suddenly make sense in Christ, but the whole world, the whole of history suddenly makes sense at last in him. Welcoming Jesus, receiving him is to receive a great revelation of purpose.

And it's to begin to share in that purpose of the gospel for the whole world, recognizing the unique and only God and Savior. Welcoming Jesus means we hail redemption's happy dawn.

And like these people, we sing through all Jerusalem that Christ is born in Bethlehem as the Savior of the world. To welcome the Savior, as old Simeon did, means a reception of peace for our personal world.

It means we share in the peace of the gospel of Christ. It means a revelation of purpose for the whole world. And it calls us to share in that purpose of the gospel for the world.

[18 : 00] But it also means, if you look at verses 34 and 35, it also means that there will come to us a realization of pain.

To embrace Jesus Christ means to share personally in the pain of the gospel as well. 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. See, here is the realization that to be caught up in the marvelous story of the Savior, Jesus, is to be caught up in the disturbance that Jesus and his gospel provokes always.

And everywhere in this world. In the world, and also in our own human hearts. Remember, it was Jesus himself, it was the Prince of Peace, who said that in a very real sense he came also not to bring peace, but a sword.

That is a sword of division. Because the gospel of Jesus is the great divider of men. And it has been right from the very beginning.

[19 : 21] And old Simeon knew that, and he was honest about it. He didn't hide it. Even from Mary, Jesus' mother. And that is because, you see, you can't welcome Jesus, you can't follow Jesus without, well, without following and walking in his way.

And his way in this world is the road to the cross. And Simeon is alluding here in his words to the words of the prophet Isaiah, about the coming Messiah. Isaiah said in chapter 8, verse 14, he will become a sanctuary.

A place of peace. A place of salvation. But he goes right on also and says, he will be a stone of offense. And a rock of stumbling to many.

And you just need to read on a little more in Luke's gospel to see how true that was of Jesus' earthly ministry. If you've never read Luke's gospel, by the way, we've got copies outside. I'd love for you to take one and perhaps read it during this Christmas season.

But it will show you that there was great opposition to Jesus' ministry, and that still is the case today. Any believer who welcomes Jesus personally will soon learn that because, as verse 35 says, the thoughts of many hearts are revealed when they're confronted with the message of Jesus.

[20 : 41] He shines his light into people's hearts. And there are many who will find that for them that is a rock of offense because they're offended at the demands that Jesus will make of them.

Jesus will dare to criticize our lifestyles. He'll criticize our loves, perhaps. Criticize our ambitions. He'll criticize our autonomy and call us to bow the knee and to follow him and listen to him.

And that's why Simeon says here in verse 34 that Jesus and his message will always be a sign that is opposed. And I have to be as honest as Simeon is and say to you that no follower of Jesus will ever be able to avoid that offense and that opposition.

There is a sword that will pierce the soul, not just of Jesus' earthly parents, but all who will love and welcome him and who will belong to him and become part of his true family.

There's a dark side to following the Savior because in this world he was a man of sorrows. And actually our Christmas offering this year is a reminder of that, isn't it? As we're seeking to support Christian brothers and sisters in northeast India who have suffered terrible persecution, attacks and violence and murder, burning of their homes and of their houses in recent months.

[22 : 06] There is a rock of offense. But nevertheless, this song and this passage ends not with sorrow, although that sorrow is real, but it does end with joy, with Anna, the octogenarian or maybe the centenarian.

And she chimes in, if you look at verses 36 to 38, she chimes in her part in the song and Anna reminds us that welcoming Jesus and receiving him personally leads above all else to a response of praise and a proclamation.

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. And 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 Jesus to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

You see, if you truly welcome the Lord Jesus Christ, you will become a sharer in the praise and in the proclamation of the gospel. Whether Anna was 84 or 107, it doesn't matter.

[23 : 19] What's clear is she is a woman whose life was focused on God's plan of salvation, on God's gospel. She is a truly gospel-hearted woman. Verse 37 tells us there her whole life was one of longing for God, longing for him to come with power and salvation into his world.

And that's what filled her prayers. That's what filled her thoughts and her deeds. And it's what filled the thoughts and the deeds of others like her. Verse 38 says, others who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And you see, people who make their prayers, the desires of their hearts, God's heart desires, will never be disappointed. Look at verse 38.

The Holy Spirit brought her at that very hour when Jesus was brought to the temple. He was not going to let her miss out. And she knew then, she knew her prayers had been answered.

She'd found the Savior, Christ the Lord. And here was the Messiah that she had waited for and now, she enters into his story forever. She's caught up in that wonderful eternal drama of God's saving purposes of grace for this world.

[24 : 36] What did it mean for Anna, this ancient warrior of faith? Well, she threw aside her Zimmer frame if she had one. And look at verse 38. You see what she does? Her heart has been opened to the presence of the Savior and so her lips are opened in praise.

You see, her response is praise to God and proclamation to men and women. Giving thanks to God and speaking of Jesus to all who are waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

In fact, proclaiming Jesus to people is the truest praise of God that can ever come from our lips, isn't it? That's what thrills the heart of God the Father.

Not the sweetness of our song or the harmony we wish we could all sing like Joel, but the subject of our song. That's what thrills God. He rejoices as he make his son known in this world.

And that is real praise of God. To sing of the Savior with all who long for redemption and to all who are longing for that. No doubt some of these folk here were like Anna.

[25 : 40] They knew where to look. They were eagerly waiting for God. But I'm equally sure that some of them had only the vaguest hopes. Some of them have become surely very disappointed, despairing even.

Many of them will have surely given up hope altogether that God would ever hear their prayers and ever do anything to change this sad world. I suspect most of them had no real expectation at all that God would ever really intervene to help them and give them hope.

And I suspect that that is the story of many people in our world today this Christmas. Many people, perhaps all people, have great longing in their hearts, don't they, for something more.

For something that will bring real hope, real meaning, real purpose to life. But so few people really have any belief that they will ever actually find that. That it could ever be found in this sad world of ours.

But friends, it was into exactly that kind of world. It was into our world. It was into this real world that the message of Luke's gospel comes in this testimony from Simeon and from Anna and the others.

[26 : 49] We can find all this and much more even than this in Jesus Christ, in the Savior of the world. In Him there is peace for our own lives, for our own history.

In Him there is purpose for this whole world and its history. And yes, there will be always pain for those who truly welcome Jesus and belong to Him.

Luke doesn't hide that. Nor can he hide the reality that all of those who embrace Jesus as Simeon did will equally always become people of praise and of proclamation.

God calls us to become like those heavenly angels. To bring glad tidings of great joy to sing the song of our Savior to this whole wide world. To promise the Savior to all of those who are seeking for a Savior whether they're conscious of it or not, whether they're just blindly hoping but never really trusting.

Praise to God and proclamation of His Son. That's the true song that defines always the real people of God.

[28 : 01] And music, as Martin Luther says, is God reminding us that He has created man for the express purpose of praise and extolling God.

So let's sing all you citizens of heaven above. Come and behold Him. Come and born Him. Born the King of Angels. Come, let us adore Him. Christ the Lord.

And that's the truth. out to the rápido music can reach