

Simeon's Farewell to the World

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon explores Simeon's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah and the implications of His mission for both Israel and the Gentiles.

Scripture: Isaiah 42:6, Isaiah 49:6, Luke 1:15, Luke 2:29, Acts 2:3, Romans 9:32, Romans 11:11, Romans 11:19, Ephesians 5:18, 1 Peter 2:6

Topics: "Jesus Fulfillment", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Piper preaches on Luke 2:21-40, focusing on Simeon's Farewell to the World as the central theme of the passage. The aged characters like Simeon and Anna symbolize the passing of the era of the law and the prophets, welcoming Jesus as the fulfillment of their faith. Luke emphasizes the importance of continuity between the old and new eras, showing that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts is seen as a continuation of the Spirit's work in the old era, highlighting the unity between the two. Simeon's prophecy reveals that salvation will extend beyond Israel to all nations, emphasizing the inclusive nature of God's plan for redemption.

Transcript

Luke 2:21-40

If we count our Christmas eve meditations as an exposition of Luke 2:1-20, then we have arrived in our evening Luke series at chapter 2 verse 21. The unit I want to look at tonight therefore is 2:21-40. I have called the message "Simeon's Farewell to the World" because his speech seems to be the central focus of this passage. There are some other things though that we will want to talk about too. First let's read the text.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

And 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 that 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, looking 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 should not see death before he

had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came 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 lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy 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 set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till 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 gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking 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 city, Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

If you believe, as I do, that God "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11), then there are no such things as accidents in an absolute sense. That is, while there are many events that are not willed by any human (and in that sense they are accidents), nevertheless there are no events not willed in some sense by God who controls all things. That means there is divine meaning in all events if we could only see it. Usually we can't since now we see in a glass darkly. But sometimes in unusual cases of coincidence, with the help of God's word, we can penetrate through to God's meaning.

There is such a coincidence here in Luke 1 and 2. Why is it that Elizabeth, Zechariah (John the Baptist's parents), Simeon and Anna are all very old? Why did God ordain that the parents of the last prophet be aged and that the parents of the Messiah be young? Why are the two witnesses Simeon and Anna on the point of death when they see Jesus and testify to him? The question arises not just out of incidental curiosity but because Luke himself seems to stress their age. He makes it explicit in each case (1:7; 2:29,36f).

There are two clues that suggest a reason for this. First, in all four cases these old people are pictured as very devout and godly saints. In the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah Luke stressed that they walked in all the commandments of the law and were righteous before God (1:6). In the case of Simeon and Anna Luke stressed that they were devout Temple goers and cherished the hope of the O.T. prophets. Simeon, he says, is "looking for the consolation of Israel" (2:25). And Anna is "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38). In other words these were model O.T. saints who kept the law of Moses and looked with eagerness toward the hope of the prophets.

The second clue for why it's old people who welcome Jesus into the world comes from Luke 16:16, where Jesus says, "The law and the prophets were until John, since then the gospel of the Kingdom of God is

preached. . . " Luke is the only gospel writer that records this saying of Jesus and so we can see that this was significant for him. Up until John the Baptist's coming the word and the rule of God had been proclaimed through the law and the prophets, but now with the arrival of Jesus, the King and his forerunner John, the word and rule of God is proclaimed and encountered in a new way. Jesus is the Word; Jesus is the King; the long awaited Kingdom has now arrived (at least partially). For those who believe in Jesus a tremendous shift occurs: no longer do we live merely in the era of promise with the law and the prophets awaiting the consolation of Israel. Now we live in the era of fulfillment when the Kingdom of God is preached as present and powerful, albeit not yet consummated.

With those two clues as my guide I would suggest that Luke is illustrating two things by showing us these four aged OT saints. First I think he wants us to see that an era is drawing to a close, the era of the law and the prophets. He shows us this by depicting the best representatives of that era as aged and at the point of death. They are passing away just like the era of the law and the prophets. The second thing Luke wants to illustrate is that there is no conflict between the law and the prophets and the new age of the Messiah. He shows this by depicting the most devout people under the old era as the most receptive to the new era. Elizabeth and Zechariah and Simeon and Anna do not become resentful and angry that the Messiah has come, not even that he will be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles." They rejoice that the new has come.

So Luke prepares us in this way for important issues to come: with Jesus comes a new age and a new message among the Jewish people: the aged era of the law and prophets is passing away, behold the new has come. Nevertheless Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to complete them, fulfill them by purchasing the redemption they offered and living the life they commanded. Therefore, all the true saints of the Old Testament faith will welcome Jesus with open arms because he fits perfectly as the goal or climax of their faith. But the hypocrites will reject and persecute him.

Both of these things were important for Theophilus to understand. As a Roman official he knew that the spreading religion of the Christians was causing disruption in every synagogue it came to. Riots broke out and there were beatings and disputes. Therefore, what could he conclude but that the Christians were just another sect distorting the ancient and respected Jewish religion which had the sanction and protection of the Roman government? So Luke had to get across to Theophilus that the tumult caused by the Christian message among the Jews in every city was not because it distorted or rejected the Jewish faith. On the contrary, the best Jewish saints rejoiced at its coming. There were other reasons which became clear as the gospel progresses for why Jesus was rejected and his people persecuted by the Jews.

Luke is very eager to dispel the notion from Theophilus' head that Christianity is disruptive to peace and order. This may be part of the answer to a question that arises in Luke 2:39 where it says, "And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own city, Nazareth." The question is why Luke omits the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem by Herod and the flight to Egypt by Mary and Joseph and Jesus before returning to Nazareth. There are three possible answers. One is that he never heard of those events. I find that hard to believe since he knows so much else about the events surrounding the birth of Jesus and seems to have gotten some of his information from Mary. A second answer is that the point of the sentence in v. 39 is not that they went back to Galilee right away but that they fulfilled all the requirements of the law before leaving Jerusalem. Luke may or may not have known about these events, but they were beside the point. A third answer, that fits with what we have just seen about Luke's concern not to let Christianity be seen as violent and revolutionary, is that Luke knew about the slaughter and the flight to Egypt but purposely omitted them because they might

have created the false impression for Theophilus that this religion has been properly rejected by the authorities ever since the start and therefore should be resisted not followed.

There is one other theme in our text that fits in here with Luke's concern to present Christianity as a law-abiding religion which does not reject the Jewish faith. Four times in this passage Luke draws attention to how the parents of Jesus did everything according to the Old Testament law. According to verse 23 they presented him as it is written in the law of the Lord." In verse 24 they offer a sacrifice "according to what is said in the law of the Lord." In verse 27 "they bring the child to do for him according to the custom of the law. And in verse 39 they leave Jerusalem only after "they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord." There must be a message for Theophilus in that stress, namely, this child did not grow up in a hot bed of sectarianism but in a poor and deeply devout Jewish household where he was taught all things according to the law of the Lord. So the era of the law and the prophets may be passing away but it is not because Jesus opposes the law and the prophets but fulfills them.

There is one other facet of this passage that I should mention before we look at Simeon's Farewell. I feel I would do Luke an injustice if I did not gather up his references to the Holy Spirit and say something about them. He has referred to the Holy Spirit 10 times so far (through 2:40). That in itself shows how important the Spirit is for Luke. But what he says about the Spirit is even more significant. Here in our text the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon in verse 25. In verse 26 the Spirit reveals that Simeon will not see death 'til he sees the Messiah. Then in verse 27 the Spirit moves Simeon to enter the temple at just the right moment to see Jesus. (Which incidentally is a beautiful illustration of how the Spirit works to fulfill what the Spirit promises.)

If that is all Luke said about the Spirit's work I suppose we would conclude, as many have, that before Pentecost the Spirit was upon people but afterwards He is in people. That is a common view, but an oversimplification, I think. In three places in chapter 1, Luke describes persons as filled with the Holy Spirit. In 1:15 John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. In 1:41 Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women.' In 1:67 Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. Now the remarkable thing about this is that the very phrase used here before Pentecost is used for what happened at Pentecost and often thereafter.

In Acts 2:3,4 Pentecost morning is described like this: "There appeared to them tongues as of fire distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues..." Then in 4:8 Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks to the rulers. In 4:31 again the disciples "were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." In 9:17 Ananias is sent to Paul that he may regain his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Then finally in 13:9 Paul again, is filled with the Holy Spirit to denounce the magician Elymas. (See also 13:52). And Paul (using a slightly different Greek verb) says to all Christians: "Don't get drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Which is an amazing parallel to Luke 1:15 where the angel says of John the Baptist "he shall drink no wine . . . and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit." Since the very same phrase is used by the same author before and after Pentecost it would be unwarranted to say that radically different experiences are meant. What we should conclude is that what Christians experience as the fullness of the Spirit today was also experienced by people before Pentecost too. What is distinctively new in our experience of the Spirit I will save for another time. In the meantime let's not oversimplify and assume that all the saints prior to Pentecost were somehow spiritually inferior because they could not enjoy the fullness of the Holy Spirit. (I hope to preach on the Spirit in the morning services soon.)

Now we turn briefly to Simeon's Farewell to the world (2:29-35). The angel had said, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." Now Simeon, a man of great faith in God's consolation, sees Jesus and is ready to die in peace. And his peace is not because he has a naive notion that the Messiah will bring only joy and prosperity to his people. He knows that Jesus will be spoken against, some will fall because of him. His peace is in the assurance that God keeps his word (he has seen the Messiah "according to thy word") and somehow beyond all the conflict to come salvation will prevail.

Most of what Simeon says about Jesus is an application to him of prophecies from Isaiah. Isaiah 52:10 says, "The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." Simeon says, "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all the peoples. What was only implicit in the song of Zechariah, namely that the beneficiaries of God's salvation are not Jews only but also Gentiles. This now becomes explicit in the song of Simeon. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah who comes to bring glory to Israel, but the mercy shown to Israel overflows the banks of Israel and brings revelation to all the nations. Isaiah described the mission of the Messiah like this: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (49:6; cf. 42:6). Isaiah implies that it would be a dishonor to God's servant-Messiah if he did not give him more to do than simply restore the glory of an oppressed and sinful Israel. That's too light a thing. So Simeon, following Isaiah, assigns two tasks to Jesus (this little baby!). As the light of the world he brings revelation to the nations and glory to Israel. That means that he will reveal the true God and the true way of salvation to the Gentiles who, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:18, "are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their heart." In Isaiah 42:6,7 God puts it like this: "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name. My glory I give to no other." Therefore, the mission of Jesus to the nations is to open their eyes to who is truly God and to bring back glory to Him which has been given to all sorts of created things (Romans 1:20-25; 15:9-12).

And to Israel Jesus brings glory. What is the glory that the godly Israelites longed for? Zechariah pictured it like this (1:71-75): They are to be delivered from the oppression of all their enemies and the covenant promises are to be fulfilled so that they may all serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of their life. But that did not happen at Jesus' first coming. Israel rejected their Messiah. In fact God's purpose was that by means of this very rejection salvation might come to the Gentiles. Paul says in Romans 11:11, "Through their (Israel's) trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness mean?" In rejection their Messiah Israel unwittingly unleashed a tidal wave of grace in the world. But we should not think that God is done with Israel yet. Paul goes on in Romans 11 and says, "A hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come from Zion and He will banish ungodliness from Jacob and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'" Paul does not mean that every individual Jew will be saved that ever lived. Jesus, said the judgment for some Jews in his day would be worse than for Sodom and Gomorrah and Paul said in Romans 9:3 that his kinsmen were accursed/cut off from Christ. "All Israel" means the nation as a whole at some future time when Jesus banishes ungodliness from Jacob and forgives their sins. They will be saved just like anyone else and will join the one people of God. This will be the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy

that Jesus will be a light "for glory to Thy people Israel."

The last part of Simeon's song in verses 34-35 has been implied in what we've said already. God's plan is to bring the light of salvation to the Gentiles through the Israel's rejection. So here that rejection is predicted. He will not be well received by all. For many he will be a sign to be scoffed at, spoken against and rejected. And when men speak against Christ they stumble and fall. This too is an application of Isaiah's prophecy (8:14; 28:16) which both Peter (1 Peter 2:6-8) and Paul adapted. Paul wrote in Romans 9:32,33 that Israel failed to attain righteousness because "they have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'Behold I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; but he who believes in Him will not be put to shame.'" The way God saw fit to bring salvation to the Gentiles (to us) was to lay a stone in Jerusalem that the vast majority of Israel would stumble over.

There is a warning here that Paul expresses in Romans 11:19-21. He says to the Gentile Christians, "You will say, 'Branches (unbelieving Israelites) were broken off so that I might be grafted in! That's true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you.'" Thus when Simeon says that Christ is set for the rise and fall of many and for a slandered sign, that thoughts of many hearts may be revealed, we understand that what is being revealed is whether a person has a heart humble enough to trust Christ alone for salvation or whether the person's haughty and must be brought low.

In conclusion is it possible to see any unity in the three parts of our study? I think it is. First we saw that for Luke the era of the law and the prophets has grown old like Simeon and Anna and is passing away. Christ and the message of His Kingdom has come. Nevertheless he does not come to abolish but fulfill. There is continuity with the old. The best O.T. Jewish saints are most receptive to the new age.

Second we saw that Luke depicts this new era as marked by an amazing outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. But he also shows that this same Spirit was at work in a similar (though not identical) way in the old era, in Elizabeth and Zechariah and Simeon. So again there is newness but also continuity between the new and the old.

Finally, we saw in Simeon's song that in this new era of the Messiah salvation would spill over the boundaries of an unbelieving Israel and reach all the nations of the world. But even here the old is not abandoned. The Messiah will bring glory to the people Israel when he banishes ungodliness from Jacob. So again there is newness but also continuity with the old.

This is a fundamental truth that will affect the way we read our Bibles: with Jesus comes a new era but the old when properly understood is not against the new but in harmony with it.

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