

May 1, 2022

THAT YOU MAY HAVE CERTAINTY
Luke 2:21-40
(6 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)

Every once in a while I'll teach a course where I assign the students papers to write. And without exception I lay out to the class the importance of having a thesis in your paper. Just give me a statement, I tell them, that tells me what you're trying to argue or accomplish in this paper, and then I can grade the paper, looking to see if you successfully made the argument or achieved the purpose you've stated. Every time I say this to the class before they start writing, and every time I go to grade those papers I still find myself having to write on some of those papers, "I don't know what your thesis is. What were you trying to accomplish with this paper?"

We can't say the same thing with regard to Luke's gospel, though, can we? He tells us very clearly why he's writing this gospel and what he's trying to accomplish. You'll remember, he tells Theophilus in his introduction that he's writing an orderly account of the things concerning Jesus so "that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (1:4). That is his purpose. That's what he's trying to accomplish. He wants Theophilus—and all of us who read this gospel—to have certainty concerning who Jesus is and what he did. He wants us who read his gospel today to know for certain that Jesus really is who we've been taught that he is and really did what we've been taught that he did.

And it's important that we don't lose sight of that purpose because it helps us understand the specific sections of Luke's gospel as we come to them. And we'll see it this morning as we look at Joseph and Mary bringing the infant Jesus to Jerusalem in order to present him to the Lord and make the sacrifice necessary for Mary's purification after giving birth. What we'll see in the text is that Luke is giving us more and more evidence that Jesus really is who the Scripture says he is and really did live, die, and rise from the dead so that we might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And the evidence he gives us now is the witness of an older man and woman at the temple who prophesy once more about who Jesus is and what will happen with him. Now, I say "once more" because already we've seen the witness of the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, and a host of angels who appeared at his birth. Luke has given us a lot of evidence about who Jesus is, but he continues to give us more in this text. He's like a lawyer who is mounting up evidence in front of the jury that makes the verdict undeniable.

And the evidence Luke points us to in this specific text comes simply as Joseph and Mary are walking in obedience to the Lord. In fact, this text is framed with Luke showing us that Joseph and Mary were simply obeying the Scripture. We're told in verse 21 that they circumcised Jesus when he was eight days old as commanded under the law of Moses. And then we read Luke hammering home that they were walking in accordance with God's commands. Just note in verses 22-24 how frequently Luke points out that they're obeying the Law. He writes, "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 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.*'” And then, in case you’ve missed it, Luke comes back to the point again at the end of our text, writing in verse 39, “And when they had performed everything *according to the Law of the Lord*, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.” Clearly Luke wants us to see that Jesus’ parents were careful to obey God’s commands.

Now, though this isn’t a main point of the sermon, I do want to note that the confirming prophetic word that this couple will hear (and which we will focus on) comes to them as they’re simply going about obeying the Lord. The law of Moses prescribed that after a woman gives birth to a son, she is required to wait forty days, and then she can enter the sanctuary and make an offering for purification. Typically, this would be a burnt offering of a lamb and then a sin offering of a turtledove or pigeon. However, if you weren’t able to afford a lamb, then you were allowed to offer two turtledoves or two pigeons, and since that’s what Joseph and Mary bring, we can assume they were probably poor. Additionally, the law called for bringing the firstborn to the temple for an act of redemption. And so Mary and Joseph are simply obeying each of the commands of the law in coming to the temple. This is simple obedience to the Scriptures.

And that’s something for us to keep in mind. You and I don’t have to be able to understand how everything is going to work out in our lives. We don’t have to know what things will look like five years from now, how the Lord will orchestrate and take care of meeting all of your needs in that time, etc. We need to focus on obeying the Lord day-in and day-out. Should Joseph and Mary have thought, “We need more prophetic witness that our son, Jesus, really is the promised Messiah,” they could have gone crazy trying to figure out how that was going to happen or been filled with anxiety wondering if they’d miss a chance to get such a prophetic word.” But wouldn’t that be silly in light of the fact that God is in control, directing history toward his purposes? I mean, we just saw how he moved Caesar’s heart to call for a registration just so that Joseph and Mary would be in Bethlehem when Mary was ready to deliver.

And so, the couples is just doing the next thing the Bible made clear they should do, and the Lord is taking care of everything. As they obey, the Lord is making sure that an elderly man named Simeon shows up at the temple on the same day they’re bringing Jesus there in order that he can give a prophetic word about him. And the same is true in regard to the details of our lives. The Lord is in control. He’s written out your days before they have been lived according to Psalm 139. Just obey him. He’s got the details. It’s not on you to figure out precisely how he can bring that spouse into your life or provide every need you have. You just obey. Seek first his kingdom, and he’ll take care of the details, just like he feeds the birds and clothes the lilies. And on this day, he orchestrated the details of an old man named Simeon coming up to the temple at the same time that Jesus is brought.

Now, the reason it’s important for Joseph and Mary to get there at the time that Simeon is also there is that God had made a promise to Simeon that he wouldn’t die until he saw the Messiah with his own eyes. We see that in verses 25-26: “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."

Then, as he comes to the temple, he sees Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus, and Luke says, "He took [Jesus] up in his arms and blessed God and said" (v. 28). And it's here—what he says—that I want to focus our attention because I think this prophecy provides for us the most important elements Luke wants us to see in this text. What does this prophecy tell us? Let me state the elements one by one. First, it once more confirms that Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus is the Christ

Again, we've noted this a few times, but Luke is wanting us to see just how clear the Lord is making this. As we've said, he's acting like a lawyer, piling up evidence before the jury. After all, remember his thesis—he wants Theophilus to know that the things he's heard about Jesus are certainly true. And Theophilus has been taught that Jesus is God's promised king, the son of David would come to save his people and reign as our forever king. Therefore, Luke is solidifying that truth once more with one more piece of evidence from Simeon.

The Lord had promised Simeon that he wouldn't die until he saw the Christ. And then, on this certain day, the Spirit moved him to go to the temple. I think that's what Luke wants us to see when he says, "He came *in the Spirit* into the temple" (v. 27). The Spirit moved him to go on this particular day, and then as he sees the baby Jesus the Spirit confirms in his heart that this is the Christ, and so he knows that he can now die in peace. That's what he's saying when he says, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation" (vv. 29-30).

Similarly, we are told in verse 36, that there was a prophetess named Anna, and she'd been a widow for decades after her husband died seven years into her marriage. And she joins in thanking God in this moment—obviously because she is confirming the very truth that Simeon is declaring. Thus, she gives us a second testimony in this section that Jesus is the Messiah. And so the Spirit gives us two more witnesses to the reality of who Jesus is. He is the Christ. He is God's promised king. He is the one who has come to save and reign.

Now, we've seen that before, but Luke doesn't simply add confirming evidence to what we've already seen. He also expands on showing us who Jesus is, what he will do, and what this means. We also see in Simeon's prophecy that Jesus is our salvation.

Jesus is our salvation

As Simeon takes the infant Jesus into his arms, blessing him and prophesying, he says, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation" (vv. 29-30). Do you see how Simeon frames this? Once he sees Jesus, he knows that he has seen salvation because salvation is in Christ. I mean, in one sense, we might pursh

back. He's holding the infant Jesus. How can he say that he's seen God's salvation? Well, it's because salvation is found in Jesus.

We've noted this before, but the aim of the whole Bible is to exalt Jesus. Paul says in Colossians 1:16, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and *for him*." Note that Paul says everything that exists does so *for* Jesus. God made the trees for Jesus' sake. He made the sky for Jesus. And he made us for his Son's glory. Moreover, all of history—according to Philippians 2—is leading to the day when every knee will confess that Jesus is Lord (even though some will confess this as his enemy), and thereby lead to his exaltation.

Well, that reality isn't somehow sidestepped or ignored when we think of salvation. Salvation is also about the exaltation of Jesus. In fact, when we are saved, we're saved because we're united with Jesus Christ by faith and the blessings that are his come to us. This means that we are blessed with all the blessings of salvation, and he alone is glorified for our salvation. Thus, to ask a question like, "Can anyone be saved apart from Jesus?" is like asking, "Can I be a good husband by being a bachelor?" It's nonsensical. Salvation is about the exaltation of Jesus. He not only brings salvation. He *is* our salvation. Therefore, because salvation is found in being united to the Son of God who took on flesh, Simeon is able to say as he looks upon the infant Jesus, "My eyes have seen your salvation." But he also notes that salvation is for all peoples.

Jesus comes to save people from all nations

As Simeon continues, he says, "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" (vv. 30-32). What Simeon notes here is that while the text says that he was a devout man "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (v. 25) and Anna is speaking to all who "were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38), he knows that God's Son took on flesh to do more than save his people from among the Israelites. He came to save people from every nation—Jews and Gentiles. And this, of course, fits with what God had said about the servant, whom we know as the Christ, in Isaiah 49:6, as he said, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." And this is why Jesus—when he's raised from the dead and takes his role of reigning over the world—says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18-20). The nations are his, and so he will have a people from every nation. The king will have subjects in every region of the planet over which he reigns.

That's why the church—in fulfilling the Great Commission given to us by our Lord—sees that we not only are seeking to make disciples of all of those geographically close to us, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ commands, but we seek to send out men who will help make disciples of those who are beyond our close geographical reach. We are saying to the

world, “Christ Jesus is the king over all. All the earth is his. And he demands the allegiance of all peoples everywhere.” That’s why we go and proclaim the gospel message, pleading with people to bow the knee to the risen Christ and then—in the context of a local church—teach them what it looks like to submit to their king, obeying everything that he’s commanded. Jesus saves peoples from all nations. However, we also need to understand that even though he’s king, Jesus will get a mixed response.

Jesus will receive a mixed response

After Simeon declares this first part of his prophecy in verses 29-32, Joseph and Mary marvel at his words, and then he turns to Mary and says, “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” (vv. 34-35). Let’s parse this out a bit.

When Simeon says that this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, he’s noting that the response to Jesus will be mixed. Some will indeed find salvation in their response to Jesus—recognizing him as the Christ and bowing to him. While others will confirm the awaiting judgment that is coming for them. They will oppose him, and by opposing him they will reveal the thoughts of their hearts as evil.

You see, when people oppose Jesus—the perfect Son of God—it reveals something about them. After all, he’s perfect. So, when people oppose him, it shows that they love darkness and hate the light, as John reminds us, because their deeds are evil. And this opposition will lead to Christ’s ultimate death. I think that’s what Simeon means when he says to Mary that a sword will pierce through her own soul as well. She will witness the crucifixion of her son at the hands of lawless men who conspired against him. It would be hard to imagine the pain of a mom watching your righteous son suffer the injustice and humiliation and suffering that Jesus went through on the cross.

And yet the key for us is to realize that the crucifixion at the hands of lawless men and the redemption of his people are actually seen in the same act. After all, Jesus could have stopped anyone from persecuting or killing him. We rightly sing about Jesus *allowing* men to hold and nail him down so that he could save them. By that I don’t mean they’re innocent or not responsible. They most certainly are. They’re doing what they want to do, and as they do it they’re exposing their evil hearts. In fact, it’s the sin they’re demonstrating that reveals why Jesus needs to save us—we’re sinners, unable to save ourselves. What I mean is that Jesus voluntarily lays down his life in that moment because something bigger is going on. He’s not simply being killed by the hands of lawless men. He’s laying down his life to suffer the penalty that our sins deserved in order that we might never face the wrath we deserve. He’s doing it to save us.

In the Scripture, God repeatedly reveals himself as one who will by no means clear the guilty or who will not acquit the wicked. Yet we read in Romans 3:23-24 these words: “For all have sinned

and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified.” Now, let’s stop there for a second. Do you hear how odd that sounds? All have sinned *and are justified*. To be justified means to be declared righteous. It is to acquit someone of guilt. And yet Paul says, “All have sinned . . . and are justified.” How? How can a holy and righteous judge who will not acquit the guilty and will by no means clear the wicked, justify sinners? Well, Paul continues, “And are justified through the redemption that is *in Christ Jesus*, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom 3:24-25). We are united with Christ so that what who he is and what he does counts for us. And so Christ bears the punishment for sin on the cross, God can say to those *in Christ*, “Your punishment has been satisfied, and you are cleared of all guilt.” That’s how a just God justifies sinners like you and me but remains just. It’s because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and because we are united with him by faith. That’s what Simeon is foreseeing in this child—a death that will pierce his mother’s soul and a death that is necessary for her salvation.

But how are we “in Christ?” How are we united with him? It is by repenting of our sins and placing our faith in him. We must believe he is who the Bible says he is and trust in his work for our salvation. Then live in light of his word, even as we see in this text. He is the Christ. You must believe that. Salvation is in him alone. You and I need to see that our lives are to be spent for his glory. All things have been created for him. Part of bending the knee to him means making sure that others hear of him so that they might bow the knee and honor him as Lord as well. And though many will oppose our message and our Lord, there will be some who will hear his call to them through our preaching. Let us then not lose sight of who he is or the task that he has given us as his people. Let us even this morning renew our commitment to that as we come to the table. Amen.