

Bite Size Bible Study

Christmas Story – 7 Simeon & Anna #223

By Pastor Lee

This is the seventh in a series on the Christmas Story. This segment is dedicated to Simeon & Anna.

This is another element of the Christmas Story that is often ignored.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, Jesus' mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Lk 2:25-35 NIV

Simeon

Jesus, as a baby, was presented on the 40th day in the Temple in Jerusalem to a righteous man (some believe a priest) named Simeon. This was to fulfill the requirement of the Torah. "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal." (Exo 13:2) When Simeon received the child, he made some sweeping claims as he addressed God and spoke of the child. This was the child who had come to redeem both Israel and the Gentiles.

Anna

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38 NIV

Now, an old woman by the name of Anna appears on the scene, she "Gave thanks to God, and spoke of Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem".

Several interesting things that are hidden in plain sight are found in these two verses.

1. Luke calls her a prophet. A prophet is the one who receives the words and commands directly from God and is charged with relating them to the King (if there is one) and the priests.
2. Secondly, she is the daughter of Penuel. Although this is a common Hebrew name it has some significance.
 - a. Penuel was the name of a clan leader within the tribe of Judah (1 Chron 4:4). He was a descendant of Hur and the progenitor of Gedor.
 - b. In Genesis 32:24-32, Jacob wrestled with an angel at Penuel, a place on the north bank of the Jabbok River, east of the Jordan River, and south of Succoth. Jacob named the place Peniel, which means "the face of God", after seeing the angel's face and recognizing that his life was spared. The angel also changed Jacob's name to Israel.
3. Penuel was from the tribe of Asher. Asher's tribe controlled the northwestern-most territory of Israel, a region that was fertile and ideal for agriculture. Because of this and the tribe's prosperity in oil production, the symbol of the Tribe of Asher was the olive tree.
4. She is very elderly for that period of history, and she lives in the Temple. This means that she witnessed the Hasmonean civil war and the Romans conquering Jerusalem in 63 BCE, ending the independent Jewish state and making Judea a Roman client kingdom.

Apparently, Luke could find no witness to inform him of what Anna said on that occasion. All we have is the one hint regarding the hopes of her audience – that is the that the child would be the redemption of Israel.

Obviously, Luke chose not to fabricate her speech.

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Lessons to be drawn

Simeon's Nunc Dimittis (a Latin phrase that translates to "now lettest thou depart". also known as the Song of Simeon). In this song Simeon offers a beautiful promise to Mary, with a warning. Simeon says to her:

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.

Luke 2:34-35 NIV

The text seems to affirm that a sword will pass through the soul (life) of both Jesus and his mother. This text tells the reader that Mary will participate in this event of the cross and her suffering will contribute to revelation

where *"the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."* Mary's faithful presence at the cross will cause evil forces around her to look at themselves and contrast their brutality with her courageous love.

Because of the cross everyone involved is strangely exposed.

1. The disciples believe, but in their fear they run away.
2. Peter makes bold promises but falls into denial.
3. The high priest wants to preserve the sanctity of the temple and keep the Romans from intervention in his sacred space. In the process he participates in the death of an innocent man.
4. The soldiers only obey orders, and those orders violate Roman justice.
5. Pilate wanted to keep his job and stay out of trouble. He was presumably scared lest the temple authorities send a negative report to Caesar that would damage his career. His personal strategic interests were clearly more important than the innocence of one village craftsman. Pilate's true nature was exposed by the cross.
6. The thoughts of the hearts of many were revealed by the suffering of the cross, and Mary participated in that suffering.

On Golgotha Mary chose to remain to the end and witness the suffering of her son until his death. She was not under arrest and could have walked away. She knew she could not change what was happening before her by arguing with the soldiers or pleading with the high priests. The response she was free to make was to choose to remain and enter into Jesus' suffering. Indeed, a sword passed through her heart, and in the process, once again, she became a model for Christian discipleship.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke emphasizes a remarkable aspect of Jesus' life. In the stories Luke chooses to tell he makes it clear that this Savior came for both women and men. A careful examination of the book of Luke unearths at least twenty-seven sets of stories that focus one part on a man and in the other part on a woman.

Among these is the parable of the good shepherd with a lost sheep and the parable of a good woman with a lost coin (Lk 15:3-10). The first story emerges from the world of men and the second from the life experience of women.

Then there are the two stories of the farmer who plants a mustard seed in his garden and the woman who kneads

some yeast into her bread dough (Lk 13:18-21). Again, the text presents one story from the life experiences of men and a second from the daily life of women.

Even the birth stories of Jesus, recorded in Luke, contain three such pairs. These are:

1. Gabriel visits two people: Zechariah and Mary.
2. Two songs are sung: one by Zechariah and the other by Mary.
3. There are two witnesses in the temple: Simeon and Anna testify to the redemptive plan of God that will be fulfilled through Jesus.

Granted, Simeon is given more attention than Anna. But if Zechariah and Mary are compared, Mary is more prominent. Her response to Gabriel's good news is of a higher quality than Zechariah's. The promise of a son for Zechariah was a gift that fulfilled his dreams while costing him nothing. Yet he failed to believe this good news because his wife was beyond childbearing age. As a result, he was confronted with a second miracle: He was struck dumb until the child was born.

By contrast, Mary was told that through an act of God she would give birth to a son. Unlike the promise to Zechariah, the gift offered her, could have cost her, her life. But, unlike Zechariah, she quietly accepted this costly discipleship and said humbly, *"Let it be to me according to thy word."* Then she too was exposed to a second act of God. But her second miracle was the good news that her cousin was to have a baby. Instead of a miracle of judgment, she witnessed a miracle of blessing.

Summation

Matthew wants his readers to see Jesus as the new Moses come to set his people free. He creates, therefore, a parallel between the birth of Moses and the birth of Jesus by including the account of the murder of the innocents. (covered in the next segment of the series)

Luke wants his readers to see both men and women and shows both to be prominent throughout the ministry of Jesus. This concern for all humankind surfaces three times in the birth stories.

Mary is presented as a model for discipleship. Through her suffering she participates in exposing the evil that needs to be redeemed. This participation was foreshadowed in the words of Simeon.