

## "The Song of Simeon"

*Songs of Promise*

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(Lk. 2:21-35)

### **Introduction.**

My wife Lorie reminds me from time to time that I suffer from "male refrigerator blindness." I can be looking for something, like a jar of mayonnaise, in the refrigerator, trying with all my might to find it, and not see the thing, even when it's right underneath my nose. Any of your other men suffer from this disease? Some of us have a problem seeing something even when it is right in front of us.

This is nothing new. All over the world and throughout human history, people have been unaware of the most amazing things, even when the truth was right in front of them. For example, On December 17, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, NC, Orville and Wilbur Wright did what no one had ever done before. They flew a craft that was heavier than air for the first time in history. Elated, they sent a telegram to their sister Katherine which read, "We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas."

Hurriedly, she ran down the street and gave the telegram to the city editor of the local newspaper. She thought it would be the big news scoop of the young century. He read it carefully, smiled, and then said to her, "Well, well! How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas."<sup>1</sup> He didn't see the amazing truth right in front of him!

2,000 years ago a young couple made their way into the temple of Jerusalem to do what the Jewish law required after the birth of their firstborn son. That day they walked past many people who didn't take any notice of the young family. They weren't aware of the remarkable truth that God's salvation was right in front of them.

But there was one old man that day who saw with eyes of faith. His name was Simeon, and when he realized just who that baby was, he sang a song of promise that has reverberated down through the centuries. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ this week, I want you to reflect with me on Simeon's song of promise.

### **I. The Background to the Song.**

*"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 upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 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..." (2:25-27).*

What was it that enabled Simeon to see what others missed that day? How did he develop eyes of faith while others were blind to the truth of God? I believe it was Simeon's character and his spiritual habits of faithfulness which enabled him to see what others missed. A lifetime of following the Lord prepared him for that day.

There are several things this passage says about Simeon. **First**, it says that **he was righteous and devout**. Simeon was regular in worship, and he walked with God on a daily basis. His

heart was fully devoted to the Lord, and he sought to cultivate the rhythms of the spiritual disciplines in his life to take him deeper into the heart of God. Have you ever been around a person like that? The word that comes to mind which describes them is “holy.” I’ve known a handful of people like that in my life, and whenever I’m around them they stir in me a desire to want a more intimate relationship with God. That’s the kind of person Simeon was.

John Ortberg has observed<sup>2</sup> that Simeon didn’t lead a movement. He didn’t form a community, build a resume, or accomplish a bunch of great things. Instead he watched, and he waited, and he prayed. He was keeping hope alive. It was as if Simeon was saying, “I believe God is doing something wonderful in the world, and I don’t want to miss it.”

**The text also tells us that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel.** This means he was looking for God to provide relief to the nation and liberty to the people. For many centuries, Israel had been a conquered nation, and the people were subjected to a series of foreign governments after they lost their independence. However, there were those who held out hope that God would one day send a deliverer as He had done before. They yearned for the day when God would send another one like Moses who would lead the people to freedom, and the OT was filled with promises of a Messiah who would bring salvation to the world. Simeon was a person who looked to the future with hope despite the despair of outward circumstances. He believed God wasn’t finished writing the story just yet, and he was waiting for the consolation of Israel.

A question that many of us wrestle with at Christmas is *“Have I gotten everything I’ve been waiting for?”* The answer is *“No, I haven’t.”* I never will – not in this life, not in this world. The more important question I need to ask myself is, *“What kind of person am I becoming while I wait?”* Will I wait in patience and trust? What is God doing in me in this season of waiting, and what is God trying to teach me?

I don’t know what you’re waiting for, but we’re all waiting for something. Maybe you’re waiting for someone to love you. Or maybe you’re waiting for a job to be able to support your family. Perhaps you’re waiting to be healed, or for a child to come home, or for your deep anxiety to go away. Maybe you’re waiting for the economy to come back, or for love to heal a marriage that’s broken and it’s killing you. How long will you have to wait? I don’t know. But I do know that what matters most is the person you are becoming while you wait on the Lord. Simeon didn’t waste the time he had to wait, and God prepared him to witness something great.

**Finally,** the passage says **the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon,** and he was moved by the Spirit of God to go into the temple that day. Three times the Holy Spirit is mentioned in this passage in reference to Simeon. He was a person who was sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and he responded to the nudges of God. The Lord revealed to him he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Messiah, so in faith he waited with eagerness for the time when God would keep this promise. When that time came, Simeon was attentive to the Lord’s leading.

Simeon saw with eyes of faith, and he understood the true identity of Jesus because of his character and his spiritual maturity. What is your character like this Christmas? Are you making progress in your spiritual maturity in Christ? Have you, like me, lost your sanctification a few times during the holidays because of the stress and strain of the season? Or are you walking in peace and with a purity of heart, looking for Jesus to show up this Christmas? Have you been so busy that Christ has passed right underneath your nose, and you missed Him and the blessing He wanted to give you this Christmas? Cultivating the character of Christ is so important at this or any time of the year.

## II. Simeon's Song of Promise.

In this passage we find Simeon's song of promise. It's called the *Nunc Dimittis* classical music literature from the first words of the Latin translation of the text which begins with "Now dismiss...." When the old man took Jesus into his arms, he sang a song of praise and said, "*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*" (Lk. 2:29-32).

There are several things that stand out in Simeon's song of promise. **First, he sang about the faithfulness of God.** What the Lord promised, He did. God was faithful to keep His Word. In a day when politicians lie to us, when advertisers make false promises, when we begin to wonder if we can trust anyone at all, it's good to know we can count on God and that He will be true to His Word. Some of you are struggling to trust God this Christmas? It seems like He has forgotten you? I'm sure Simeon wondered that at times, too, but God was faithful to His promise to Simeon, and He will be faithful to you as well.

**Next, Simeon sang about the fact that he could now die in peace** having seen the salvation of God with his own eyes. He personally witnessed God's greatest Christmas present ever in the little baby who would be the salvation for the world. Peace is sometimes hard to find at Christmas, isn't it? I pray each of you will find peace in your heart this Christmas - the peace of God and peace with God.

**Finally, Simeon sang about the light Jesus would be to the Gentiles and the glory Christ would be for His own people of Israel.** Here we see the missionary message of the gospel hinted at in the lyrics of Simeon's song. Christ was not only the Savior of the Jews; He would also be the Savior of the world. The Good News is not something we can keep for ourselves; we must share it with others.

What's your favorite Christmas carol? Despite all the claims most people make about which carol is their favorite, I think that for many folks their favorite song at Christmas is the Rolling Stones' classic hit, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction"! Is there any time of the year when dissatisfaction is more prevalent than at Christmastime? We feed our lust for something more, something better, something we didn't get. And our presents the day after Christmas seem few, small, and insignificant when compared to others.

In contrast to all this is Simeon's song of promise speaks of a deep satisfaction. He can die in peace and he's satisfied, all because he had seen Jesus. If Christ was the only gift you received this Christmas, would that be enough for you? If Jesus was all you had, would you be satisfied?

## III. Simeon's Prediction.

When Simeon finished his song, Mary and Joseph marveled at what was said about their baby, and the old man blessed the parents. But then he made a startling prediction, and he addressed his words specifically to Mary. He said, "*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*" (2:34,35).

Simeon wasn't trying to be Scrooge or the Grinch who stole Christmas when he said these strong words to Mary. Rather, he was able to discern and understand that this child would be a dividing line in human history, and the revolution He would bring would not be welcomed by everyone. Simeon said that Christ would be a sign which would be spoken against. The old man was one of the few to comprehend that not everyone would accept the message of salvation and not everyone would welcome the Messiah with joy. Simeon somehow understood that

Jesus would be controversial and that some would accept Him while others would reject the Messiah.

Philip Yancey writes that when the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he brought along with him samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it before. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when Ricci showed them the paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child grew up only to be executed, the people reacted with revulsion and horror.<sup>3</sup>

Philip writes, "As I thumbed through the stack of Christmas cards we received this year, I realize that we in Christian countries do much the same thing. We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we tend to eliminate from it any reminder of how the story that began at Bethlehem turned out at Calvary."

Simeon's prediction also involved Mary herself. He turned to her and said, "*And a sword will pierce your own soul, too*" (2:35). He made a prophesy that Mary's heart would be broken when she realized just what it would cost her Son to accomplish the salvation of the world. 33 years later Mary was with her boy, her firstborn, but this time she was with Him at the foot of a cross. She watched her little baby, now a grown man, die by Roman crucifixion as a payment for your sins and my sins and her sins. The shadow of the cross hovered over the holy family even at that first Christmas.

### **Conclusion.**

Somehow Simeon sensed that though on the surface little had changed in the world, underneath everything had changed. Herod still ruled, Roman troops were still executing Jewish rebels, Jerusalem still overflowed with beggars. And yet a new force had arrived in the person of Jesus to undermine all the world's powers. Simeon had the great blessing to witness and see it all himself.

What special miracle does God want you to notice this Christmas? What little surprise will He bring your way that could very well change your life? Are you cultivating the character of Christ so that you have a purity of heart that will see it when it happens? Are you looking for the Lord to show up in unexpected ways? We must see with eyes of faith, or it may pass us by.

I close with this. Loren Eiseley wrote a book titled *In All the Strange Hours*. In it he tells a story of visiting with a professor named Dr. Radnor. He's an astronomer who spends his nights on top of Mount Palomar in California peering into outer space through the great telescope that is on top of that mountain. Eiseley asked him, "Professor, what do you see out there? Stars? Is there anything new brewing in outer space?"

The Professor replied that what he was looking for was the remains of a missing planet. He went on to explain that between the Jupiter and Saturn there is cosmic dust. There is space enough between the two planets for a missing planet and that the cosmic dust would not be there if a planet had not at one time been in that space. It was once there, and now it is gone. At some time, it blew up, as all stars and planets eventually will.

Then Eiseley said to his friend the astronomer, "I never heard of a missing planet before. Why is it that no one else ever found it? Why hasn't someone else seen it?"

Professor Radnor replied, "They weren't looking for it."<sup>4</sup>

Are you looking for Jesus this Christmas like Simeon was when Jesus was born? Keep your eyes peeled. He may yet show up for you! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from *Today in the Word*, December 28, 1999.

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<sup>2</sup> John Ortberg in his sermon “Simeon’s Song,” posted on [www.PreachingToday.com](http://www.PreachingToday.com), 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Philip Yancey's *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Frank Harrington in a sermon he preached at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA, on December 6, 1998.