

The Testimony of Simeon, Part 4

Luke 2:29-35

Joseph and Mary, they didn't have time, necessarily, to ponder all the significance of what Simeon had just said. No sooner had he spoken of God's preparation of salvation, which culminated in this child, Jesus, than he specified here exactly what he meant by all peoples. And here is where things start to get a bit dicey, "All peoples" according to verse 32, meant Jew and Gentile. You see that there? "A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Some commentators, myself included, they see light there in opposition to salvation. Simeon blessed God for "your salvation that is light." And after that, Simeon puts revelation in parallel relationship with glory. So the two lines would read like this, Light for revelation to the Gentiles; light for glory to your people Israel. The light of divine salvation, it results in two things: Revelation and glory. Revelation for the ignorant Gentiles, glory for the disgraced Jews. Light lifts Gentiles out of the darkness, and light lifts Israel out of the shame and the

humiliation that God had subjected them to because of their sin and idolatry. Salvation God prepared in the presence of all peoples it's a light that binds both Jew and Gentile together in one glorious people of God.

That may not seem very significant to you, a Gentile in the 21st century, living in the reality of the New Testament church here on the other side of the world. But listen, this was a staggering revelation to these two Jews. Even though it had been foretold from ancient days, this was very hard to swallow. God had telegraphed his intent clearly in the Old Testament, going all the way back to the Abrahamic Covenant. God's very first words to Abraham, which are recorded there in Genesis 12:1 through 3, reveals his purpose. He told Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and," get this, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God intended Israel's glory to draw the nation to himself; all the nations of the earth. It was Israel's failure, then, to fulfill its God ordained purpose that resulted in God's judgment. God judged the nation Israel because they failed to draw the other nations to God. Then he promised to act on his own behalf.

In fact, turn to Ezekiel 36, it reveals the new birth. It reveals the role of the Holy Spirit, and it's in that context, there in Ezekiel 36:22, in referring to God's intention to save his people, that God identifies Israel's failure to be a light to the Gentiles. So look at it there starting in Ezekiel 36:22. "Therefore, say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, it is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I'm about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them.'" Seems like God doesn't like that, does he? He doesn't like the profaning of his name, but then he says this, "And the nations will know that I am the Lord," declares the Lord God, 'when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.'

Again, remember Simeon's words? "Your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all the peoples." God elevated Israel, never for Israel's sake alone, but for the sake of the holiness of his own name. In the sight of all the peoples, all the nations of the earth, God continued, in Ezekiel 36:24, to declare here the New Covenant. He says, "I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the countries, bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall

be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

Why? Again, to bring glory to his name, to reveal the holiness of his character. Same thing we learn from Paul in the New Testament, there in Ephesians Chapter 2. Every single saint is the workmanship of God, Ephesians 2:10. "Created in Christ Jesus for," what? "Good works." Why? Because "God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." What's the point of that? So people can see and observe and know this is the God we worship. We become like what we worship, right? We give glory to him when we live like he wants us to live. And it all started here with Israel.

Back in Isaiah, Isaiah 42:6 to 7, God said, "I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for 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." Listen, those with blind eyes, those imprisoned in dungeons sitting in darkness, that's a reference to us. That's a reference to the

Gentile nations. We belong to these Gentile nations of whom Simeon spoke, and in those early days, they were utterly ignorant. They were abysmally lost in darkness. But listen, Israel had failed. God acted then, in sending his own son to fulfill Israel's purpose. That was the point. And the child that Simeon cradled in the crook of his arm, he was the very embodiment of that salvation. A light for revelation to the Gentiles, a light for glory to your people Israel.

Listen, before we move on, let's take a moment to reflect on the implications of all of this for us today. Since our God, from the very beginning, since he demonstrated grace and concern and mercy to every single person on the entire earth, that has implications for us as well; how we think about other people, how we treat other people. Listen, all racism, all prejudice, all favoritism, all the tendency toward preferential treatment of other people, that has no place in biblical Christianity. None at all. God's love reaches out universally. Since no one is beyond his concern, no one should be beyond our concern either. Listen, that's not to mean everybody embraces the truth. They don't. But we ought to reach out in love to all people without making any distinctions. The Gospel is a message we should proclaim to all without any distinction.

Since God's salvation, which he prepared in the presence of all peoples, brought light for revelation to us Gentiles, you know what? We honor God by studying and learning what he revealed to us, by knowing it intimately and deeply. God took great pains and many centuries to bring saving revelation to you personally. He sent you a Savior. He gave you a holy book. So don't prioritize lesser things. Learn his ways, worship him for his amazing wisdom and grace.

Such a gracious message from Simeon! It could only mean national celebration, right? No more conflict, no more trouble, no more revolts, nor more riots, nothing but feast and festival and rejoicing. Israel would embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord, and they would coronate him as king, and they would live happily ever after, right? Is that how the story goes? Sadly, no. Simeon wasn't finished, though. After the good news came, some bad news. There's a dark side to the marvelous message of salvation. And as he speaks here directly to Mary, Simeon's words strike a somber note, they take a foreboding tone. Sadly, not everyone would embrace the child as Simeon did, with joy and contentment. Take a look at verses 34 to 35, "Simeon blessed them," that is, the parents, "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.'"

This saintly old man, having spoken prophetic words to both of Jesus' parents, he blessed them, understandable, very appropriate. But then he turns his attention to Mary, and he delivers some very troubling news: division, opposition, the piercing of a sword. Before we consider the meaning of what Simeon said, why would he reveal this to a young, rejoicing, celebrating young mother? I mean, why, why now? Isn't this a little heavy for her? Can't she just enjoy the infancy of her child? To some it might seem cruel to strap her with this dark and dreadful burden. Couldn't she just enjoy Jesus' younger years.

It's interesting, first of all, Simeon speaks these words to Mary. The text specifies Mary, not Joseph, one of the many reasons it's apparent Joseph didn't live to see Jesus reach adulthood. This profound, soul-piercing sadness would be experienced by Mary alone. And perhaps that is the gracious purpose in what Simeon revealed to her. She needed to know from the very beginning that this child is not her child. He has been God's vessel of salvation with purposes that transcend any of her personal hopes and dreams for her son. The painful

separation would cut against the grain of Mary's natural, God-given maternal instincts. God is here preparing her for the inevitable pain.

And as Luke narrates here, he's emphasized the maternal connection that Mary had with Jesus; natural connection. Simeon has turned to Mary and, though it doesn't say so, the emphasis seems to imply almost that he pulled her aside privately, at least turned to her and not turned to Joseph. It says and Simeon said to Mary, quote "the mother of him." That's literal. See, Mary needed to know that her blessing in giving birth to Jesus; in raising the Messiah in her home, it was a different blessing than any other mother on the earth in all of history or in all of future had ever experienced. She needed to be flexible with her expectations. So better to let her know now so that she knows it's all according to plan. Nothing has gone off track, nothing is being derailed. We wouldn't want to be overwhelmed with grief in the moment of sorrow, lose heart knowing her days with Jesus are numbered. This would even help her to take and treasure every single moment. Not a bad mindset for any parent really.

But let's take a closer look at the warning Simeon has just unveiled. First, here Simeon told Mary, you can picture him



pointing at the baby, "This child is appointed," it's the passive voice of the person doing the appointing is slightly veiled, but it's clear that God is the one who did the preparing, and he's also the one who's done the appointing. The child is appointed for two immediate purposes, you can see there, for the fall and rise of many in Israel and, number two, for a sign one that will be opposed, or literally, a sign that would be spoken against.

The first immediate purpose is the fall and rising of many in Israel. The word fall, it's the word *ptosis* and as you can tell from the context, it means more than just tripping and falling to the ground, literally, okay. The word is more comprehensive and final. This is a fall you do not recover from. The idea is utter disaster. It's complete destruction. It's total collapse. But Simeon also spoke of the rise of many in Israel, and that's the word *anastasis*, which literally means to get up from a seated or a prone position, but figuratively, this is the word used exclusively in the New Testament for resurrection.

Jesus was also appointed to raise some up. Now, obviously there would be those in Israel who would one day fall in the sense of being judged, condemned for sin, just as there would be

those who would one day rise to eternal reward, that was clear, not altogether surprising, but Simeon is saying more than that, much more. The many who were appointed to fall in Israel, their demise happens from a lofty height. It happens from an apparently unshakeable and unassailable position. Everybody thinks, these guys are fine, they'll never fall. The fall Simeon, here, is talking about is completely unexpected. God would topple those who appear to others to be righteous. He would reveal them for who and what they really are.

On the other hand, the many appointed to rise in Israel, they rise up from a lowly position. They rise up from an unnoticed segment of the population. Again, totally unexpected, totally unanticipated. God will reveal the humble for who they are. He will show his approval of the meek. He will elevate them, and the meek will inherit the earth. Their identity is not going to remain hidden. Their reward will not be withheld,

Listen, God appointed Jesus Christ to subvert human expectations, to overturn the proud and to elevate the humble. Those who seem most spiritual, who appear most religious, who put on a righteous face before men, they are the ones God is going to judge because in truth, though the house looks good on the outside, friendly face, cheerful greetings, doing all the

right things, serving all the right places, these people, their hearts are actually very far from God. On the other hand, those who are easily overlooked, being poor, humble, softly spoken, meek, people like Simeon and Anna, people like Joseph and Mary, people like the lowly shepherds, those are the ones God will raise up. Those are the ones who quietly obey, and they are the ones who ultimately attain to the resurrection of the dead.

So here's Simeon, sent by the Holy Spirit to remind Mary of what she rejoiced in, that God opposes the proud, and he gives grace to the humble. Jesus is appointed for that purpose, for the rise and fall of many in Israel. Listen, he is the most polarizing figure in all of history. If you know the truth about Jesus and you proclaim the truth about Jesus, not just the love part, but the demands as well; not just the tolerance, though that's there, but also proclaim his deity; proclaim his demands, proclaim his claims about himself; you can't stay neutral. He's polarizing. He creates division. There's a second immediate purpose there in verse 34, Jesus is appointed for a sign that is opposed. As I said, the word opposed, it literally means spoken against. It's the preposition *anti* plus the verb *logo*, to say or to speak. So it's to speak against.

Repeatedly in Jesus' ministry, the scribes and the Pharisees dogged his steps, seeking a sign, perhaps it's better to say they were demanding a sign from him. Jesus refused to cater to their demands. Why? Because he himself was the sign. That's exactly what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 1:22 to 25 when he wrote, "Jews demand signs, Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

Listen, Jesus is the sign who will be opposed, to be spoken against. He's the catalyst that exposes the true division that already exists. Jesus is appointed to divide humanity into two camps. That's the immediate purpose. But notice there in verse 35, there's an ultimate purpose. "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed." Those are the two immediate purposes. Then the end of verse 35, "So that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

God sent Jesus to winnow Israel, to sift Israel, ultimately to judge Israel. His scrutiny and his judgment go directly to

the heart and they expose motives, they reveal intentions. They broadcast hidden opinions to bring everything to the surface. Because of Jesus, people's true thoughts, they are no longer able to be hidden. God will examine everything in the blazing light of his holiness. Jesus, he came to divide Israel, separating them into the sheep and to the goats. Those who embrace him in repentance, faith, loving obedience, those are his true sheep. And those who reject him, those who hear but don't obey, they're the goats. They're the ones who will suffer his judgment, and great will be their fall.

Now, don't forget the context. Again, Simeon spoke these words to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Tears had to fill her eyes. Even then, as she looked down at this perfect, tender flesh of her precious baby, how could anyone reject him? It doesn't make sense and that's exactly right. It doesn't make sense. How could anyone reject him? If anyone rejects Jesus, the perfect Savior, you know what? His condemnation is proven. His condemnation is just. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the condemnation on that individual is proven to be righteous, and God is the righteous judge. God's justice would be demonstrated, but this would hurt her deeply. And I believe Mary's sadness and pain, as a parent, as a mother, it's just a small picture of God's pain and sadness

in this. The deeper the relationship, the deeper the sorrow, right?

Notice again this parenthetical warning given to Mary personally in verse 35, “A sword will pierce through your own soul also.” That speaks of an almost unbearable, unmerciful, soul-destroying pain. The word for sword there is not *machaira*, the typical Roman short sword, the 18-inch one worn by the infantry. This is the *rhomphaia*. This is the large, broad sword that was wielded by mounted cavalry. It was a long, heavy sword designed to come crashing down from a mounted position on infantry soldiers and smash through helmets and armor and just slaughter; inflict mortal wounds.

A *machaira* would have been enough to penetrate Mary’s tender heart to pierce her delicate soul, but a *rhomphaia* seems like overkill. This pictures a penetrating grief that would shred her soul, that would tear it to pieces. And that is exactly what happened at the crucifixion. As Mary stood at the foot of the cross, as she watched the flesh of her dear firstborn son torn apart by Roman nails, it’s impossible to imagine the agony that had to have been for her, helpless to come to her son’s aid, helpless to do anything in the presence of mocking soldiers, her own mocking country men, suffering and

dying. Division was appointed in Israel and Jesus was appointed to be the focal point. That division would result in violent opposition, causing pain and sorrow. The human pain and sorrow, it's just a picture of the divine sorrow in the rejection of Jesus Christ. But folks, that was the cost of our redemption.

And that brings us back to the marvelous message of universal salvation that we share in rejoicing with others. It's all summed up beautifully in Peter's words in 1 Peter 2:6 to 8. Peter, there, combines the two prophecies really from Isaiah that speak of this, highlights two opposite responses to Jesus Christ. He combines Isaiah 8:14, a passage about Israel's rejection, with Isaiah 28:16, a passage about those who believe. It's a wonderful message. 1 Peter 2:6-8, "For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,' and, 'a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to."

Everyone wants the marvelous message and who can blame them, but once they've heard it and their sin is exposed, their

pride is revealed, their motives are confronted, their sinful thoughts are exposed and rebuked, some respond in stubbornness and pride and they will fall and great will be their fall. But others respond in humility and repentance, in meekness and obedience and you know what? God will raise them up. It's no wonder Joseph and Mary marveled, right? So do we.

God's gospel is an awesome gospel. It cuts to the very depths of our hearts and it creates division, that's the point. It divides humanity into two groups, only two. And it's not Democrat and Republican. It's those who oppose and those who embrace. We see that happening around us. It's painful, isn't it? This division of the gospel and of Jesus Christ, it separates friends and loved ones sometimes, doesn't it? But those who embrace the message, those who embrace Christ, those who embrace God's salvation, they are eternally blessed in God. He's enough for us. And you know what? Those are our people, aren't they? Those are our people.

Let's close in prayer. Heavenly Father, we rejoice in your salvation as Simeon did. He delighted, was rejoicing, overjoyed to see your salvation in the person of Jesus Christ physically before him. He saw, but he was a believer before he even saw your salvation. And Father, we also believe without seeing. We





long one day to have our faith become sight, to see and lay hold of that for which we were laid ahold of by Christ Jesus. We give all praise, honor and glory to you in Jesus' name. Amen.