

The Testimony of a Senior Saint, Part 1

Luke 2:36-38

Simeon and Anna just like Zechariah and Elizabeth, they were, as the Bible so delicately puts it, they were “advanced in years.” That is to say they were old people. In Anna’s case, as we’re going to see in a moment, it’s very likely that she was really old. She’s probably more than 100 years old. I hope it doesn’t offend any of you that I have referred to these dear godly saints as old people, that I feel compelled to say that is an indication of how far we’ve fallen as a culture in our neglect of the Biblical mandate to honor the aged. Job rightly said in Job 12:12, “Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days.”

And that’s why the Law of Moses prescribed in Leviticus 19:32, “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God, I am the Lord.” And that’s based on the foundational building block of society called the family. God designed it; he established it as the institution for the socialization and teaching of our children.

The family, a male father, female mother, the family is a powerful, powerful institution for instilling the principles of dignity and honor into every single citizen. We find it in this basic fundamental command of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." This establishes the principle of showing honor to everyone.

Basically, if you can learn to show honor to your parents, then you have the framework for honoring others as well. Based on that principle of honor Peter has prescribed, 1 Peter 5:5, "Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to your elders." That is, obey them, submit yourselves to them, seek and follow their counsel, do what they say. Many young people today find that ludicrous, absolutely laughable. Listen to what some old person has to say? Obey them? Are you kidding me? That kind of an attitude marginalizing the elderly, that's been going on in our country now for about a century. The young have become accustomed to older people seeking them out, catering to their preferences, their schedules, their desires. We can see evidence of that attitude everywhere from media to marketing, from the marketplace to the church. Society now favors the young and society stigmatizes old age.

Don't you find that sad? I certainly do. It's tragic, absolutely tragic. And further, it's an indictment against our culture. It's a mark of our shame, not our progress. Not only that, but it's a clear sign that our culture is in decline, steep decline. It's a certain indication of our inevitable downfall because God opposes the proud and he puts a curse on those who do not honor the aged.

The picture is inverted in Scripture. It's precisely the opposite. The Bible actually commends the aged and it admonished the young. It's the young who are naïve, simple, who have a lot to learn. Youth is marked by folly. The process of maturation, growing up is really the escape from foolishness, by following the counsel of the godly, by following those who are older, wiser, more godly, more mature in the faith. In fact, when you look at the many who are set before us in Scripture as examples of faith and godliness, they're old people.

Enoch was a 365 year old man and he "walked with God," it says in Genesis 5:24, "And he was not, for God took him." Noah, he was 500 years old when he fathered Shem and Ham and Japheth. Incredible to think about sitting on the lap of your 500 year old dad. He had half of a millennium, half of a millennium of experience to pass on to those boys. You can compare or contrast

Enoch and Noah with Abraham, the father of those who are righteous by faith. Abraham was about 100 years old when Isaac was born, and he died at the age of 175. Then Moses, he was 80 years old when he led Israel out of Egypt. Abraham and Moses, though, were mere teenagers when it comes to those older saints, their forefathers. When we think about others commended to us in Scripture, prophet Samuel, King David, the prophets Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, they were all most effective in the Lord's service as older men.

In fact, it's not overstating the case at all to say that the Bible testifies that the best days of God's saints are in their later years, their golden years. It's not youthful energy that accomplishes the will of God. It's a heart that's devoted to righteousness and truth. It's a heart that is devoted to meekness and wisdom, right? That's Zechariah 4:6, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts." And the Lord's Spirit is not hindered by a lack of energy.

Those who are older, those who've spent their lives investing in godly pursuits like Enoch, they've learned what it means to walk with God. They are the ones we should honor, seeking their opinions, listening to their wisdom, obeying their godly counsel. Now just as a caveat here, it's true what they

say: there's no fool like an old fool, is there? Old age alone, years on the calendar, whatever, does not make someone wise.

Those who've attained old age, you know what? They're entitled to our honor based on the principle of honoring father and mother. Depending on the person's character, sometimes that's a challenge, but it's never an option. But those senior saints, those who've devoted themselves to God, those who have navigated a sin-cursed world in a sin-cursed body for many, many years, that's a joy to show honor to people like that. Isn't it?

The older, wiser saints, they've learned to distrust self and trust only in God. They've clarified that the only source of true joy and lasting happiness is in Christ and Christ alone. They have longed ceased to be deceived by youthful lusts, to be led astray by frivolous pursuits. Instead, they've devoted themselves to godliness. Eternal realities increasingly outshine temporal, earthly pursuits as Paul expressed in 2 Corinthians 4:16 and following. He said, "Though our outer self is wasting away," can I get an Amen? Yeah. "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For

the things that are seen are transient," they're passing, "but the things that are unseen are eternal."

The subject of our study this morning, Anna, the prophetess, she could have written those words of Paul. The light momentary affliction that God brought into her life, it produced in her an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison and if she were here today before us, she'd love to tell you all about it. So, we're going to take a look at her testimony. See here in Luke Chapter 2 what produced such wisdom.

Let's just read the short section there. It says, "And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was 84. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem."

Once again, as we mentioned with the story of Simeon, the setting is the temple complex, probably the court of the women, where Mary and Joseph had come to present their offerings and to present baby Jesus. Simeon has just finished speaking when Anna shows up. The focus is on the testimony of these two senior

saints. Simeon and Anna, they're examples to you. They're examples to all of us. They're models of a godly paradigm. And those of us who are younger, so much to learn as we seek to honor, and learn from godly examples that are in our midst. That includes you.

So let's start by finding out who Anna is. First point: The identity of a senior saint, the identity of a senior saint. Verse 36, "There was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher." Her name is actually Hannah with an H. The Greek text actually uses a rough breathing mark before the, A, so we should pronounce her name Hannah with the H. And if we did pronounce her name as Hannah instead of just Anna, it might help us make that Biblical connection with her namesake back in 1 Samuel 1 and 2.

Several parallels between the Hannah of the Old Testament and the Anna of the New Testament, both women mourned for different reasons, but both mourned. They experienced a deep sorrow in their heart. Both women responded to their sadness not through anger, depression, self-pity, but through humble prayer, through fasting and bowing before God and that meant that the focus of their devotion was in the symbolic presence of God on

earth. For Hannah that was the tabernacle. For Anna it was the temple.

And that's where the parallel ends because the very next word in the Greek text receives the emphasis of Anna's identity, which is what Luke wants us to see about her. Anna was a prophetess. Even before Luke tells us about her family and her tribe, he tells us about her role. He tells us about the special gifting of the Lord on her life. Prophets are those chosen by God, those called by God, set apart from others to receive special revelation from God. That is to say, God spoke through them. And it wasn't a constant stream of unending revelation that they were just walking down the street speaking God's word all the time, but you know in some cases, it was actually quite seldom.

But nonetheless, God used the prophets as a conduit of his word, his revelation to people. Luke doesn't tell us when Anna became known as a prophetess, but it's likely that God activated her right around the time of Jesus' birth. That aligned with the activity of the Holy Spirit in other people we've met in this text: Mary, Zechariah, Simeon. These, after all, are the days of light. The day when the, the sunrise from on high is shining,



when God broke the 400 years of prophetic silence and it all started right here.

According to Luke 1:67, Zechariah prophesied, he joined the ranks of "the holy prophets of old" that he mentioned in verse 70. His son John was called, "the prophet of the Most High," verse 76. And now, Luke, he's added Anna's name to the rank of prophets, an exclusive honor indeed. And especially for women. Jewish tradition named seven women as prophetesses: Sarah, Miriam, Debra, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther. Of those, though, the Bible names just three of them as prophetesses: Miriam in Exodus 15:20, also a passage in Numbers and Micah; Debra is named in Judges 4:14; and then Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14 and following. Isaiah's wife might be put in there as well, depending on how one interprets Isaiah 8:3.

In the New Testament, you see a couple of times there in Acts 21:8 and 9, that names the daughters of Philip as prophetesses. 1 Corinthians 11:5, it acknowledges, but it doesn't identify, it does acknowledge women who are prophesying with uncovered heads in the Corinthian Church. Again, not many were prophets, male or female, and just a few women in Scripture were called prophetesses.

The unique situation after Anna's time in the early church, after Acts Chapter 2, there's miraculous sign gifts, there's wide distribution of the gift of prophecy. It signaled a unique New Covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit. God had promised to restore the nation Israel and in so doing, according to Joel 2:28, "It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." Now we see evidence of that here in this text. We saw evidence of some of that in, in the early part of Acts. But you know what? It fades. It fades over time. The complete fulfillment of Joel 2:28 and following, it awaits Israel's full repentance as a nation.

But it was telegraphed by the Spirit of prophecy, some that fell on some of the saints of the early church. That started here even with Anna the prophetess. Her gift of prophecy was ordained by God, it came by agency of the Holy Spirit and it was on par with the male prophets, same gift, often different expressions, different roles, different roles in the church, but she was a vessel nonetheless. She was a conduit; she was a mouthpiece of divine revelation just like her male counterparts.

Now, notice not much is said here of Anna's ministry. Luke doesn't even record any of her words. And that's typical of the Bible's treatment of women who had a legitimate gift of prophecy. Of all the legitimate prophetess's named in Scripture, none of their ministries are featured in any significant detail. There are no female authors of Scripture. Prophetesses were atypical, very uncommon because God most often assigned the prophetic role to men.

So what's with Anna? Why her? What is the significance of her being named a prophetess, especially when Luke doesn't even record any of her prophetic words or tell us much more about her ministry? Excellent question. Thanks for asking. I appreciate it. I believe that this draws attention, once again, to God's intent and his designs in restoring the nation of Israel. Anna is proof positive that the 400 years of prophetic silence have been broken. For Anna to receive the gift of prophecy as a woman, that indicates God is giving the Spirit freely and widely. He's reminding the nation of Joel 2:28 and calling for the repentance, calling for their faith.

Anna is also identified there in verse 36 as a daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. Why? Same reason. Same reason, to signal God's desire to redeem Israel. There's no knowledge today

of this man Phanuel, but his name helps identify and distinguish which Anna we're talking about. Evidently, she was a woman in that day of some notoriety. We're going to find out in a moment why. The name Phanuel, though, comes from the Hebrew word *Penuel* or *Peniel*. That was the name that Jacob gave to the place where he wrestled with God. It says in Genesis 32:30, Jacob named that place Peniel, for he said "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

So after seeing God face to face, God changed his name from Jacob, deceiver, to Israel, which means having power with God. So the name Phanuel means face of God, reminds of all that history. And then Luke identifies their tribe, Phanuel and his daughter, Anna, were of Asher. Asher, that's the name, literally means happy. Asher was Jacob's eighth son and that birth brought about happiness. The tribe of Asher was one of the ten northern tribes of Israel that are known as the lost tribes of Israel after their deportation to Assyria. They seemed to have been lost in the record. Well, lost no longer. Here they are. The search is over. We found two members of the lost tribe of Asher. Phanuel and Anna are alive and well.

The families of Israel, they've been keeping genealogical records. That's what this indicates and they knew their

lineages, where they'd come from. Anna, though, daughter of Phanuel, tribe of Asher, she represents in so many ways how God has preserved the faithful remnant of Israel and how he intended to redeem the faithful of Israel. Anna's presence here in Scripture is clear and certain indication that God is concerned about women, not just men. And God will pour out his Spirit on women, too, not just men. Not only that, but God doesn't intend to restore only certain tribes of Israel, not just the priestly tribe of Levi indicated by Zechariah and Elizabeth, not just the ruling tribe of Judah indicated by Joseph and Mary, God intended to rescue and redeem his people from the unfaithful northern tribes as well, like Asher, indicated by Anna's presence here in the faithful remnant.

As Jesus said, John 10:16, "There will be one flock, one shepherd." One flock, one shepherd. A reminder of Ezekiel 34:23, Ezekiel 37:24 that God "will set over his people one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd." So Anna's presence here in Scripture unpacks all of that. A couple more significant aspects of Anna's identity we want to note here. Anna was, as we said, she's quite old. She was a widow; she was childless. But Luke uses all those facts as he presses this forward to establish her godly character.

Verses 36 and 37, it says, "She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was 84. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer, night and day." Advanced in years, that's basically the same description of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but Luke has added a word here that sets Anna apart from them. He adds a comparative adjective "advanced in many years," separating her out. This woman was old, folks, very old and as I mentioned earlier, that is not an insult. It is a mark of high esteem, of great, great honor. Anna's age distinguished her. It indicated her credibility among the people, which gave significant weight to her testimony here in Scripture and there on the scene in the temple.

After the general remark about Anna's great age, Luke gets more specific here. He says that she lived with her husband seven years from when she was a, a virgin and, young women, virgins in those days married around 14 or 15 years old. This means that she became a widow around 22 years of age. That's pretty young for a tragedy to strike, isn't it? She experienced enough of marriage to appreciate the intimacy of relationship with a husband and then her joy is cut off in the very prime of life. This is a woman who had endured profound sadness during her lifetime, and it started at a very young age. Anna had every

right to remarry; most young widows did. That was fine, but she didn't. She lived on as a widow, devoting herself to God.

There's a question at this point in the grammar about her actual age, which Luke seems to want us to know. He spent a good deal of the text in writing to indicate her age. The grammar he uses could indicate that Anna lived as a widow until she was 84 years old, that is, in the text she's 84 years old. The ESV seems to indicate and take that position or, it could mean, the way it's written, that she lived another 84 years after she became a widow. That's 22 years old, widow, and then 84 years after that until this point right here in the temple. That would put her at 106 years old. So which is it? For several contextual reasons, I believe Anna was 106 years old, not 84. It's true that whether 84 or 106, it does put Anna in the category of advance in years, but Zechariah and Elizabeth were advanced in years, as well, they're likely in their sixties or seventies. Anna was advanced in many years. It seems to separate her by a generation from them. She's distinguished here as much older. It also explains why Luke would spend so much time.

And we have to keep in mind the author's intent here. Why does Luke want us to see the length of her widowhood? Well, he's establishing here beyond the shadow of any doubt at all the

validity and the credibility of Anna's testimony. It wasn't just her age that established her testimony. Anna was a woman of uncommon character and Luke wants us to see that, not just the length of her widowhood, but the character of her widowhood.