**Prepared to Die Well**

Based on [Luke 2:22-40](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk2.22-40)

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First Sunday after Christmas

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The gospel for the First Sunday after Christmas takes place forty days after Jesus was born. **This is in commemoration of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Christ who travelled to Jerusalem, to the temple, forty days after Jesus was born.** There are two ceremonial reasons they did so. First, was for the purification of Mary. The second is for the presentation of Jesus.

According to Lev. 12, a woman who had given birth to a son was unclean for seven days or until the circumcision of the child and then for 33 days more dared touch no hallowed thing or come into the sanctuary. **Then after 40 days she had to come to the Temple to be purified in the prescribed way.** As the head of the house Joseph had to see to it that this purification of his wife was duly carried out. He provided the necessary sacrifices for her: namely, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. This was the purification of Mary, and the reason for 40 days.

The other ceremonial event that drew them to the Temple is the presentation of Jesus. According to Exodus 13:2 all firstborn males of Israel are holy to the Lord. That means they are dedicated to service in his temple. **However, Numbers 8:17-19 makes clear that only the Levites, those of the tribe of Levi, are consecrated to work at the temple as priests and workers.** Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi. So Numbers 18:15-16 makes plain that, though all other firstborn males still are “holy to the Lord”, they must be “redeemed”, that is, purchased back from the Lord. The price for this was five sheckles. This Presentation of Jesus was the other occasion, along with the Purification of Mary, that brought the holy family to Jerusalem’s temple forty days after Jesus’ birth.

Something else is are also communicated to us in this passage. It shows us that Jesus’ family were righteous people. **Not only righteous in the sense that they had saving faith--which is the paramount kind of righteousness—but also that they were faithful observers of God’s Law.** They got Jesus’ circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law. Then after forty days, they observed the purification according to the Law of the Lord and Presented and redeemed Jesus at the temple. This type of righteous might be analogous to someone today who regularly attends church, lives humbly, and faithfully avails themselves of the means of grace.

The Reformation of the Church 500 years ago was something brought about by God and was much needed on account of all the ceremonial abuses of the Church of the day. **Rome was insisting upon ceremonies and laws that were not the Law of the Lord, but presenting them as such. Like Jesus says of the Pharisees, they were (and still are) “setting aside the commands of God in order to observe their own traditions.”** Pomp and ceremony had, in many instances, replaced sincere faith and good works done in love for the neighbor. For instance, many Priests would sacrifice a number of masses every day, and then go home to a mistress. It was simple hypocrisy, the ceremony had replaced faith. It was on account of this that the Reformation happened, to simply stress faith alone as being what saves us before God. And even today all the masses, baptisms, church services attended avail nothing apart from saving faith. This is true.

However, what has happened today is the reverse. **Rather than saying, “Just because you go to church and have Holy Communion doesn’t mean your saved”—which is true—you hear people instead say “It doesn’t matter if you go to church or not so long as you have faith.”** I’ve even heard it said, “It doesn’t matter whether your baptized or not, so long as you have faith.” Humanity is like a drunk man on a horse, falling off one side only to hoist back up and fall of the other. First saying “Ceremonies mean everything” to “Ceremonies mean nothing.” Someone once said the opposite of error is not truth. The opposite of error is the opposite error.

Ceremonies of the church are not beneficial without faith; but the opposite error is to say they are of no effect or worth or pleasing to God at all. Rather than recognizing faith to be the ***main***thing that matters most before God, which is what the Reformation was about; some began to understand faith to be the ***only*** thing that mattered before God.

Faith is central, the *sine qua non* to holiness. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” Notice it doesn’t say, “Faith is the only thing that pleases God”. No…Faith ***saves***, faith ***heals*** and makes you well, but nowhere does it say that your faith pleases God. I’m sure it does, but faith is not your doing, but it is 100% God’s doing (Eph. 2:8-9). He gives you faith, and it is a little strange for God to compliment you for something outside of your control.

Rather, the scriptures are clear that what pleases God are your good works ***done in faith***. And you have a hand in those. **Scripture says that we were created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them** (Eph 2:10). The good and faithful servants who traded with their talents and did not bury the--the master said to *them*: “**Well done, good and faithful servant**.” We do not cooperate with God to be saved, justified or to gain faith; but ***we do cooperate with the Holy Spirit to be approved (2 Tim 2:15), sanctified, to do good works.***

All this to say that Jesus was given to and raised by righteous parents, that is, parents who kept the Law of the Lord and walked blamelessly. In Scripture, Joseph is called a righteous/just man. Mary heard God’s word and obeyed, “Let it be unto me as you have said.” Noah was a righteous man. Job a blameless and upright man. **Not all people whom the Lord saves will be as blameless and upright as these.** Scripture even teaches that there are “degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth (2 Cor. 9:6, Dan. 12:3), and there will be a difference in heaven according to the degree of our work here on earth. **All will have the same bliss, but some will shine brighter in eternity because of their earthly labours.** And the Holy Spirit, through Luke’s gospel, saw fit to point out that Jesus’ parents were of such righteousness that they did everything according to the law of the Lord, through faith and insofar as is possible for mortal and sinful men to do so.//

While at the Temple, the holy family encounters two important people, Simeon and Anna. They were not important in the sense that they were of great renown in Israel. **In fact they seem to be fairly obscure and inconspicuous people. But their faithfulness to law and their hope in the Lord are remarkable.** Just as the nameless woman who anointed Jesus head with expensive perfume is forever immortalized in the Gospels (Matt. 26:13, Mark 14:8), so too Simeon and Anna--probably unremarkable people in the worlds eyes--are seen and remember by God for their devoutness.

And Simeon too is described as a righteous man, which means more than he had faith. He was devout. **And the Holy Spirit was given him and revealed to him that he was to see the Christ before he died.** The Christ is called “the consolation of Israel”. And Simeon speaks, perhaps sings a song describing the importance of this Christ child.

First he says, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, your word has been fulfilled.” These are famous words that are the comfort of every Christian who knows Christ by faith. **Simeon has now seen Christ, as God promised, and now he is prepared to die well. After celebrating the Lord’s Supper, it is customary to sing Simeon’s song, the Nunc Dimmittis.** Because once you have eaten Christ’s body and drank his blood, you are prepared to die will. Your sins are forgiven and you have eternal life simply by believing what Christ says, “This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” In believing these words you have exactly what they promise. And even if you weren’t as devout as Simeon, or blameless and upright as Job, you have the full pardon of God through faith in his salvation.

Simeon calls the baby Jesus his *salvation*. He also calls Jesus a light to the gentiles. The Israelites, as God’s chosen people were supposed to be the light to the Gentiles so that God’s salvation would reach all people (Is. 49:6). **By observing God’s commands the other nations were to look upon Israel and say, look at their ways, their God must be great, and come to Him. Instead they failed.** So Jesus, the messiah is the nation of Israel reduced to one, and in his flesh brings glory to the whole nation, a glory that they could not attain to themselves. So Christ is our salvation; a light to all people; and he is the glory of God’s Chosen people.

And Simeon blessed the holy family, and then he prophesies about the Christ child to Mary. He says, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel.” **This means that, based on their reaction to Jesus, people will either stand or fall.** He is the stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greek, he comes not to bring peace but a sword dividing families, because there can be no concourse between truth and falsehood, between righteousness and wickedness. Whoever is not for him is against him.

Simeon says the infant Christ is to be *a sign that is opposed*. This means he will be rejected by his own people. Also, he says to Mary, “**and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.”** This means Mary will suffer great sorrow on account of this child. This is because of how he will suffer and die in her lifetime.

In short this Christ child will be the center of much controversy. And it must be this way, because that is how hearts will be revealed. God reveals hearts by how they react to Jesus. **Many will say “Lord, Lord” with their lips. However, hearts are revealed when they have to choose between Jesus on the one hand, and ease, comfort, carnal security on the other.** Many will prove faithless, either revealing their hypocrisy, or else falling away for having too much invested in the world. So Simeon was sent in and by the Spirit to prophesy beforehand, that Mary and Joseph might know the full implication of raising the Christ.

Also, a prophetess named Anna or Hannah, was at the temple. **She was a widow, married seven years and then her husband died and the remainder of her life was dedicated to God, with worshipping and fasting at the temple.** And presumably having heard Simeon’s words and his rejoicing, she gave thanks to God, and she began to tell all who had been waiting for the messiah that he had come.

Simeon and Anna are examples of those nameless faithful people of God under the Old Covenant, who were aware enough to realize that they had lived to see the ushering in of the new age**. Generations had passed from Adam and Eve, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, through David and Solomon, through the exile to Babylon and back again God’s people had waited for a messiah; and none of *them* lived to see the messiah born. But with their own eyes Simeon and Anna saw the messiah and they are prepared to die well.**

This is how we should appreciate every day, that generations come and go who do not know Christ, but we know him by faith, and we can rest assured to leave this life knowing that our redemption is accomplished. It is accomplished, not by our works done in righteousness--but by a man from Nazareth who—though he was in the form of the unchangeable God--grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favour of God is now upon us, because it was first upon Him.