

AFTER THREE DAYS
Luke 2:39-52

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Luke 2:21-38 Summary

Simeon was steeped in all the traditions of Israel and, yet, still willing – even seeking – a new word from God.

Besides what we read here, we don't know anything about Simeon. And while no one else in Israel really knew the time or season when God would send His Son, the Holy One of Israel, there was one old man who knew. At least he could ascertain with some accuracy a probable time for the birth of the baby. I don't know when God promised it. I don't know how He told him. But at some point, in some way, Simeon had been promised by Yahweh Himself that Simeon would not die until he had seen the Lord's Salvation.

Was he often standing on the top steps of the temple, scanning the faces of babies who were being brought by their parents for dedication, wondering, "That one? Maybe this one? No, how about this one, Lord? Is this the one?"

On one day, a holy day – a day like no other day – the Holy Spirit literally drove Simeon to the temple. "That's him. That's him, Simeon. That's the one. The special one. The one you've been waiting for. My greatest gift."

I picture him as an elderly gentleman who sort of springs himself on the young couple coming to the temple for the dedication. He reaches out and grabs the baby. Simeon's old face was as lined as a road map of Jerusalem. His face crinkles – there is a wide grin as he takes the Holy Child into his hands.

We all know the wonder of holding a new baby. But this wasn't an ordinary baby. This is the one for whom Simeon had been waiting his whole life. Scripture says that when, at last, he held that baby, Simeon threw back his head and began to sing acapella. Some think he'd prepared the song years before, so he'd have it ready – on the top of his mind and the tip of his tongue – when he finally, at last, held the Holy Child. But I think his song was Spirit-filled and free-flowing – music created that moment.

Both Simeon and Anna were straining to hear a new word from God.

Anna – the old woman of 84 (or 105 – married at age 14, widowed at age 21, plus 84 equals 105), who just stayed around the temple after she was widowed, always fasting and praying. There are a lot of older ladies like that, who spend their time praying for others. It's a powerful ministry. When she saw Jesus, she, too, knew. She just started giving thanks to God.

She spoke to everyone who was looking for the good word of redemption.

Setting the Stage (Luke 2:39-40)

Having been obedient to the decree of the emperor in traveling to Bethlehem for the census (2:1), Mary and Joseph are now obedient to the law of Moses in traveling to Jerusalem to fulfill their religious obligations. Even at the earliest age, everything about Jesus is an extension of Judaism. Forty days after Jesus' birth, the new "parents" travel with their infant son for their "purification according to the law of Moses" (2:22). This process ordinarily involved three steps: (1) Mary's purification involving the offering of a pair of doves or pigeons in the Court of Women (Leviticus 12:8; cf. Leviticus 5:11), (2) the redemption of the first born (Exodus 13:1-2) involving the payment of five shekels (Numbers 3:47-48; 18:15-16), and (3) the consecration of the first born (1 Samuel 1:11, 22, 28).

Luke, however, does not mention the second element, the payment for the redemption of Jesus (first born). Some scholars have argued that Jesus was already holy and, thus, had no need to be redeemed (1:35). Either way, the main emphasis is clear: the family was both pious and obedient, fulfilling the commands of God.

Following Simeon's and Anna's revelations concerning the identity of the infant (2:26-38), the family returns home to the village of Nazareth. Luke summarizes the earliest years of Jesus' life when he writes: "And the child continued to grow and became strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (2:40; cf. 2:52). This section, which begins with Jesus' obedience to the law (2:22), concludes with a word about God's grace.

Journeying to Jerusalem (Luke 2:41)

In accordance with the piety of the family expressed in fulfilling the obligations of Mary's purification, the redemption of the first born, and the consecration of the first born, we now learn that Mary and Joseph also made an annual trek to Jerusalem in order to observe the Passover. The law, in fact, required that adult males make three feasts each year in the holy city (Exodus 23:14-17; 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16). In addition to Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles were the other two. This trip would have been made during the Jewish month of Nisan (late March and early April). This "year-by-year" rhythm of traveling to Passover reminds us of Samuel's parents' family trips (1 Samuel 1:3, 7, 21; 2:19).

Passover was the opening feast of the seven-day festival known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Passover called on God's people to remember God's liberating them from Egyptian bondage. Despite God's demand that Pharaoh let God's people go free, Pharaoh hardened his heart. This obstinate attitude brought plagues upon the Egyptians. As the last of the ten plagues, the death angel passed through the land, claiming the lives of all the first born of Egypt—including Pharaoh's own son (Exodus 11:5). The death angel, however, "passed over" the homes of the ancient Israelites because they obediently smeared the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts.

The Exodus was at the center of Israel's faith, and the observance of the Passover allowed parents to teach their children about God's deliverance of his people. Exodus 12:24-27 says, "And you

shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever. When you enter the land which the Lord will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your children say to you, ‘What does this rite mean to you?’ you shall say, ‘It is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes.’”

The trip to Jerusalem was necessary because Passover was never to be observed outside of Jerusalem. We should take note that the next celebration of Passover in Luke’s Gospel occurs at the end. This first Passover journey from Galilee to Jerusalem by young Jesus, therefore, may be employed by Luke to foreshadow the future journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he also arrives to observe the Passover and spend several days teaching in the temple. On this last occasion, the death angel will not pass over the first born of God, as he dies on a cross. His death as the Passover lamb, however, will lead to a greater liberation—deliverance from death.

Coming of Age (Luke 2:42)

At the age of thirteen, a Jewish boy became obligated to observe the law. At age twelve, a Jewish lad was to enter a phase of discernment, preparing himself to become a son of the covenant/law (bar mitzvah) the next year. In providing his readers with a story from Jesus’ twelfth year, Luke was surely well aware that several stories about famous men and events in their twelfth year were circulating at the time. Such stories include the twelfth year for Cyrus, Samuel, Epicurus, Solomon, Daniel, Alexander the Great, Moses, and Cambyses.

Losing the Lord (Luke 2:43-44)

I did the funeral for Ted Roberts who served in numerous Baptist communities and positions, including the Baptist Convention of New Mexico. When sharing stories about her deceased dad, his youngest daughter, Karla, recalled being left at church by her parents. Because he was often the last one to pick up his preschooler, the nursery worker didn’t think it unusual that the minister of music, Ted, was a bit late in claiming Karla from the nursery. As time continued to pass, however, the call came to the Roberts home (remember, no cell phones in the 1960s): “Did you leave something at church?” Oh, my! The wife, Bo, thought that her husband, Ted, had picked up little Karla. In the same fashion, Ted was sure that Bo would bring Karla home that Sunday. While no harm was done, being left “in God’s house” was something that Karla kept in her mind for all these decades (her dad lived to be 96).

Perhaps leaving Jesus behind happened something along those lines. As I envision it, the family starts out with a caravan traveling the three-day journey from Jerusalem back to Nazareth. Traveling in a caravan provided both safety and convenience. It was customary in the caravan for the kids to gather in groups, and Joseph was sure that Mary had accounted for Jesus’ presence, and Mary was, likewise, certain that Joseph was well aware of Jesus’ whereabouts. With such a traveling caravan, the community acted as an extended family which cared for all the kids along the way. Just like the Roberts didn’t miss Karla until they arrived home, Mary and Joseph were not forced to face the reality of Jesus’ absence until the caravan had already traveled a day’s journey and was setting up camp for the evening. There is certainly a somber sound to Luke’s words, “They did not find Him,” and “they were looking for him” (2:45).

At a recent Vacation Bible School at First Baptist Church of Amarillo, we celebrated a Family Fun Night out on the First Baptist lawn. The event included about twenty different blow-up bouncy houses, 1,200 hot dogs, 400 pieces of pizza, and 200 barbeque sandwiches. As 2,000 people milled around, trying to keep up with their kids, we soon saw the frantic faces of one family as they were missing their youngest daughter. The on-sight security team was notified. All staff received the text to begin searching for the missing child. Having already searched for some time, the parents were close to panicking. Fortunately, the child was found safe and sound. I looked to the father and mother, who had been unnerved over losing their daughter, and said, “You’ll never read the story about Mary and Joseph losing and finding Jesus the same way again.” They heartily agreed. I quickly reminded them, however, that Mary and Joseph had to travel 25 miles back to Jerusalem and did not locate him until “the third day!” The First Baptist parents had missed their child less than thirty minutes.

It is quite a mistake to imagine that ancient families cared less or would have been less troubled by the absence of a child. Clearly, as presented in this story, Mary and Joseph were both frantic and distraught.

Finding Jesus After Three Days (2:46)

While some commentators find no special meaning in Luke’s language, “after three days,” the allusion seems too obvious to be missed. The three days would have included travel from Jerusalem on the first day, returning back to Jerusalem on the second day, and finding him on the third. One outstanding New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, sees much more to the story. He concludes that Luke clearly wants the reader to see his whole Gospel as a story of resurrection. The designation “on the third day” is a hint of the future resurrection. Along those lines, David Garland, in fact, argues that the parents’ distress at the loss of Jesus and their joyous discovery of him on the third day combine to foreshadow both the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord.

When they finally find Jesus in the temple, he is sitting in the midst of the scribes, dialoging with the teachers. Some see verse 46 as the climax of the story. Here, Jesus is sitting “among the teachers,” amazing them with his knowledge of scripture. Among the 170 words found in this story concerning “young Jesus,” the central words (by word count of the Greek text) are “among the teachers.” Having this phrase framed on each side by an equal number of words draws the reader’s attention that Jesus was known—even at the age of 12—as one having great wisdom.

Amazing Them All (2:47)

Even as he asked questions, he also gave answers. Luke, in fact, uses a curious word to describe the response of the authorities who heard the answers of “young Jesus.” They were “amazed.” On other occasions in the writings of Luke, the response of amazement is used as people encounter the supernatural. In Luke 8:56, for example, the parents of the young girl are “amazed” as Jesus raises their dead daughter back to life. In Luke 24:22, moreover, the disciples on the road to Emmaus describe the women who went to the tomb as being amazed when they find no corpse, but, rather, have visions of angels declaring Jesus is alive. Finally, in Acts 2:7, 12 (Acts is the second volume of Luke), the crowd is amazed as the Holy Spirit falls upon the church, allowing the disciples to preach in such a way that every people group hears the gospel in its own language.

Declaring Their Desperation (2:48)

Anyone who has ever found a lost child will certainly relate to Mary's harsh response to her once-lost son. A natural reaction to the trauma of searching for, and finally finding, a lost child is a rebuke for the "runaway." Mary makes it clear that she also speaks for Joseph. Clearly they have been anxious and tortured by the absence of their son. They discover that their son is not sitting on the sidelines in all silence, but in the thick of the conversation, presumably about the interpretation of scripture.

Unfolding God's Plan (2:49)

In verse 48, Mary accuses Jesus of betraying his parents, that is, of betraying the calling that is his as the son of Joseph. Jesus, on the other hand, now points to a greater obligation to a greater Father. As he stands in the temple, his response could be interpreted this way: "You should have known where to find me—where God, my Father, lives." Jesus' language, "I had to be (*dei*)," is the language of necessity that Luke often applies to God's unfolding plan (4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44). In Luke 9:22, for example, Jesus used the same language of necessity, "The Son of Man must (*dei*) suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." Sadly enough, the next time Jesus teaches in the temple, the teaching will precipitate his death.

"...in my Father's house" is literally translated, "to be in the [blank] of my Father." "House" may be implied as Jesus is standing in the temple as he speaks, but it is not present in the Greek text. Another possible translation is "to be engaged in the affairs of my Father." Either translation makes clear that Jesus is on another schedule directed by his true Father and not his earthly parents.

Increasing in Favor with God and Men (2:50-52)

While we might be surprised that Mary and Joseph, who had both experienced the miraculous announcement of his birth (Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25), would not understand the necessity of Jesus to be present in the temple, we are reminded that those closest to Jesus—his family and disciples—often found it difficult to fully grasp who he was. Until they witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection, those closest to Jesus have difficulty actually "getting the gospel."

Echoing back to 2:19, Luke informs us that Mary treasures all these things in her heart. Though she didn't immediately understand, she is open to understanding as God gives her comprehension.

Standing as the second bookend, verse 52 repeats both the idea and some specific language of 2:40. Luke finishes this story just as he began: "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."