

## Prayer

Be patient with us, Lord God, particularly when we are forgetful, or when we fail to live up to the standards of the faith we profess. Challenge our wilful obstinacy when it resists Your will, but deal gently with our unintended waywardness when we fail to discern Your light. Lead us through repentance to hear Your voice of forgiveness, so that once again, we may offer You our thanks and praise: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Listen carefully to what people say to you, and after your conversation, pray for them and their needs*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *Pray for the fellowship of the church and the groups in which people meet for prayer and Bible study*
- *Give thanks to God for the many opportunities He has given you*
- *Pray that scandals will not de-stabilise Northern Ireland*

## Meditation

What spiritual connections exist between you and Your Saviour?

- A mountain of personal experience?
- A hope that one day, good will prevail?
- Some searching theological questions?
- The longing of the human heart for love?
- A knowledge of the Lord's healing touch?
- Contact with God's people over the years?
- The truth that Christ has died to save You?
- Sustained ministry and the help of others?
- The presence of Jesus throughout the day?

Remember, these spiritual connections, often reveal to others the reality of our faith.

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## Bible passage – Luke 2:25-35

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, and looking forward to the liberty of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> He came in the Spirit into the Temple; and when Jesus' parents brought Him in to do for Him what the law required, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him in his arms and praised God; he said,

<sup>29</sup> 'Now, O Master, let Your servant go in peace, according to Your word;

<sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen Your salvation,

<sup>31</sup> which You have made ready in the sight of all,

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Your people Israel.'

<sup>33</sup> Jesus' father and mother were amazed at what was said about Him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, 'This child is appointed to bring about the fall and the rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be rejected <sup>35</sup> (and a sword will pierce your own soul too) so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.'

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# Bible Study

## Review

This passage of Luke is the third of the 'incidents' in the Temple (see yesterday's study) after Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple firstly after eight days for the rite of circumcision (2:21), and then after thirty three days for Mary's purification ceremony (2:22-24), when their meeting with Simeon took place (2:25-35). It is often assumed that Simeon was an old man, but this is not said; we assume this because Simeon speaks about being content to die having seen the '*liberty of Israel*' (2:25,26,29). However, the true significance of this event lies in what Simeon says about Jesus.

The meeting of Simeon with Jesus and His parents makes for a beautiful story. Here was a man led by God to wait exclusively for Israel's Messiah, and in those few precious moments, Simeon saw the fulfilment of His call, and gave Jesus' earthly parents both a powerful prophecy (2:29-32) about their child, and also a strange blessing and spiritual warning (2:34,35). Simeon was clearly a man of God, and Luke describes him three times as a one who was led by the Holy Spirit (2:25,26,27). Like many other great figures in the Bible apart from Jesus, Simeon arises within the pages of Scripture as from nowhere. In the manner of Elijah (1 Kings 17) or Melchizedek (Genesis 14), he appears at the right time with a special role in God's work of Salvation, and after he has performed his task, we hear of him no more.

This story finally resolves the matter of the redemption price for Jesus (2:23). Looking back, it is simple enough for us to conclude that Jesus did not require the payment of the redemption price (five shekels), because in His death and Resurrection, God would pay this, and thus secure the salvation of all who have faith in His Son. This is confirmed by Simeon's prophecy (2:30-32) and blessing (2:34,35). No redemption price could be enough for the man who would become the Saviour not just of Israel, but of the whole world (2:32). Jesus was '*a light for revelation to the Gentiles*' (2:32), fulfilling a multitude of Old Testament prophecies (Genesis 12:3, Isaiah 42:6, 49:6 etc.). Moreover, this salvation was something God had been planning for centuries (2:30f.); all that was happening was according to His plans and for the good of all people. He was watching everything closely until the redemption price had to be paid; all Simeon's prophecies look forward to that time.

It is no wonder that Mary and Joseph, Jesus' earthly parents, were '*amazed at what was said about Him*' (2:33). The prophecy of Simeon confirms the prophecy given to Mary when she first heard from Gabriel that she was to bear a child who would be God's Son (1:26f., and 46-56). Joseph had nobly trusted her and supported her, but now both of them heard the truth about Jesus from the lips of another revered person, truths that Mary had '*treasured in her heart*' (2:19).

After Simeon's prophecy (2:29-32), his blessing of Jesus is perhaps the most fascinating feature of this story; we might expect something like a version of the great priestly blessing ('*the Lord bless you and keep you ...*' Numbers 6:24f.). Yet his words come as a surprise, containing three important messages. Firstly, Jesus' life and ministry will divide people; '*This child is appointed to bring about the fall and the rise of many ...*' (2:34), because God cannot bring salvation into the world without judgement. Secondly, as much as we would imagine that a Saviour will surely be accepted, God's Saviour will be '*a sign that will be rejected*' (2:34), and this rejection will bring pain. Simeon says to Jesus' parents; '*a sword will pierce your own soul too*' (2:35). Thirdly, the coming of God's Messiah will indeed reveal truth, most significantly about the truth of people's inner thoughts and feelings (2:35).

These words read like powerful prophecies rather than blessings, but for the reader of Luke's Gospel, they reveal something of God's purposes. However wonderful the story we are about to read, its purpose is serious and has eternal consequences which the world cannot ignore.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What does this passage say about Simeon?
- What does this passage tell us about the life and ministry of Jesus, and why?
- What does this passage tells us about Mary and Joseph?

## Notes on the text and translation

### **Important words**

#### **V29 'O Master'**

The Greek word here is not the usual one for 'Lord' ('kurios'), but 'despotes' meaning a household master or slave-owner. The use of this word makes sense here; by saying 'Master, release your servant in peace ...', Simeon describes himself as a house - servant or slave in relationship to God who is his master. However, all this is long before the time of Paul, who used the language of 'lord' and 'slave' with far greater theological meaning (see Romans 7:25).

### **V34 'rise'**

The Greek word for 'rise' in verse 34 (avastasis) is the same word used for 'resurrection'. It certainly makes the whole sentence more meaningful if we think of it in this way, prophesying either the death or resurrection of people in Israel (see study).

### **Significant phrases**

#### **V25 'looking forward to the liberty of Israel'**

##### Other translations:

*'waiting for the consolation of Israel' (NIV, NRSV etc.)*

The traditional translation of this phrase is worth looking at in closer detail. The Greek word usually translated 'waiting' can also mean 'expect, or welcome'. Simeon's waiting is far more proactive than is implied by the word 'waiting'. Secondly, the Greek word for 'consolation' in the phrase 'consolation of Israel' is the same word ('paraklesis') used by John to describe the Holy Spirit as the 'comforter'. The word simply means something that fulfils a hope, but there is no simple word for it in English. Some Greek dictionaries suggest that it denotes 'setting free', and I have accepted this in my translation, because the hope of Israel was to be set free, or liberated, by the Messiah.

### **Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text**

#### **V33 'Jesus' father and mother ...'**

##### Other translations:

*'The child's father and mother' (NIV)*

*'Joseph and His mother ...' (Authorised Version)*

The text clearly says 'father and mother'. However, the translators of the Authorised Version were particularly concerned that by speaking of Jesus' father at this point, the Bible might appear to undermine the doctrine of the virgin birth. As a consequence, they replaced 'father' with 'Joseph'. We should not be so worried, and most modern Bible versions are correct to translate 'father and mother'. It is already clear from the rest of Luke who the 'father' of Jesus is (God), and that Joseph is father by proxy.

## Going Deeper

### ***What does this passage say about Simeon?***

Some think that Jesus' blessing by Simeon had its origins in a tradition in which infants were brought to old rabbis in the Temple so that they could be given a blessing. However, there is no evidence of this tradition in the Old Testament or the law (2:27), and there is scant evidence of it in rabbinic literature. For this reason, it is unlikely to be the case here.

There has been a great deal of speculation about Simeon. He is often depicted as being a priest or a Levite, but that is not said in the passage; he was simply a devout and righteous Jew (2:25). The word 'righteous' means that he lived a life that was accepted by his fellow Jews as upright, and the word 'devout' (coming from a Greek word meaning 'cautious') because he was careful in his devotion to the things of God. What is remarkable is the connection between Simeon and the Holy Spirit. If we look at what is said here about this, we find that the Holy Spirit is firstly said to be 'upon him' (2:25), secondly that the Holy Spirit disclosed prophecy to him (2:26), and thirdly, that Simeon came into the Temple 'in the Spirit', meaning guided by the Spirit. We should not think of Simeon as so filled by the Spirit that he did things in a trance! Rather, these words present Simeon as a well known and respected figure whose spiritual values were respected within the Temple because of his godliness.

We should be careful of one thing, however. The more we look at the description of Simeon here in this passage, he is like a devout Christian after the day of Pentecost rather than a Jew. After all, Jews believed that the Holy Spirit was given only temporarily to people for special times and prophecies, indeed, it was commonly believed in Jesus' day that the days of the Holy Spirit were over, because there had been no

prophets for centuries! We must consider therefore that Luke was writing for people in the days of the early church, and his description of Simeon may well have reflected Luke's assessment of Simeon looking back from later times, rather than describing him in words that would have been used at the time of Jesus' infancy. Perhaps some in the early church regarded Simeon as one of the first 'prophets' of the new age of God's Kingdom; one who therefore experienced the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit in anticipation of the coming Pentecost.

### ***What does this passage tell us about the life and ministry of Jesus, and why?***

Mary had been told that Jesus was the Messiah by the angel Gabriel (1:31-33) and the angels had told the shepherds (2:11), but now the truth about Jesus was perceived by Simeon, a Jewish man who had been waiting 'in the Spirit' for this very revelation of God (2:26). In the wider picture of Jesus' birth we gain from looking at all the Gospels, the witnesses to Jesus' birth should perhaps include Simeon (and Anna – see tomorrow's study) as well as the shepherds (Luke's Gospel) and the Magi (Matthew's Gospel). In this way, Jesus' coming into the world is witnessed not just by Jews and Gentiles, but by the poor and rich, the irreligious and religious, and both men and women; the coming of Christ breaks down all barriers!

Simeon was waiting for the coming of the Lord's Messiah, as '*a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Your people Israel*' (2:32). When Simeon saw Jesus, he knew in his own spirit that he had seen this word fulfilled! He took Jesus in his arms and praised God. We sometimes think of the blessing of Jesus as done with words, but we should perhaps think of it as done through praise.

Simeon's words form the famous hymn called the 'Nunc Dimittis' (from the Latin words with which it begins). The words are typical of someone who is released from a vow because the conditions of that vow have been completed, but this was so much more than a vow. By the Holy Spirit, God had placed on Simeon's heart the truth that the Messiah would be more than a Saviour for the Jewish people, '*a light for revelation to the Gentiles*' (2:32). This marks Simeon out from other rabbis and priests in the Temple, for they would have believed that the Messiah would come to save the Jewish people alone from their enemies. We are tempted to wonder whether Simeon's good name was held dear within the early Christian community rather than the Jewish community because of this fact alone. We can hardly imagine the Pharisees who plotted to murder Jesus because he spent times with Gentiles giving time to a man in the Temple who believed that the Messiah would save all Gentiles, not just Jews!

Of course, the possibility of the salvation of all through faith in Jesus was a revolutionary truth, even though God had shown His glory through the Jews in Old Testament times. It is likely that Luke was keen to illustrate this aspect of Jesus' coming because the man for whom he wrote his Gospel, Theophilus (Luke 1:3), was not a Jew (which we can tell from his name). If we read the whole of Luke and Acts together as one great work, then it becomes clear that Luke wrote to show how the Gospel spread from its Jewish origins to the widest boundaries of the Roman Empire, as indicated by Simeon's prophetic words said over the infant Jesus.

### ***What does this passage tell us about Mary and Joseph?***

In our passage today, we should not forget that Simeon blessed the whole family, not just the baby Jesus by Himself (2:34). This remarkable blessing must have meant a great deal to Joseph. He was a brave man to present himself with Mary and the baby Jesus at the Temple, knowing as he did that he was not the father of Jesus. In this moment Simeon, clearly a holy man filled with the Holy Spirit (2:26 – though possibly somewhat controversial – see above), confirmed Joseph as Jesus' earthly father and pronounced God's blessing on the whole family unit. If Joseph had done this anywhere near where he lived in the northern town of Nazareth, what he had done would have raised great gossip and been considered a scandal.

Scripture does not record for us the formal marriage of Joseph and Mary, and we hear no more of Joseph in the rest of the stories of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, that is, apart from the other stories which end Luke 2 (see the next two studies). There are some general comments about 'fathers' found in Jesus' teaching (e.g. Luke 8:51, 14:26, 18:20), but it is almost impossible to deduce anything about Joseph from them. Nevertheless, the more we read the stories of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, the more we find that the picture of Joseph is similar to that of the caring and protective man we find described in Matthew's Gospel. He was a man used by God to give legitimacy to the life of his Son Jesus, to provide for Him and guide Him in the social structures of the world into which he was born.

Next, the prophecy given to Mary by Simeon (2:34,35) speaks of 'the fall and the rise of many in Israel', and was not something that could easily have been understood at the time. Later generations would have understood Mary's report of this as referring to the redemptive work of Jesus as Messiah. The early church quickly learned by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 10,11 etc.) that both Jew and Gentile would have to 'fall' and submit to the Messiah who had died for them before they could 'rise' with Him to find their redemption and new life in Christ. This is confirmed by the use of a word for 'rise' derived from the Greek word for 'resurrection' (see notes above).

Simeon's prophecy also contained another prophecy for Mary which would have been difficult for her to hear; *'and a sword will pierce your own soul too'* (2:35). Here, the word for 'sword' means a large sword used for killing in battle, which is a fearsome picture for a woman. However, it was a prophecy of Mary's maternal grief at the death of her own son on the Cross after being rejected by His own people. The last part of the prophecy says, *'so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed'* (2:35), and this is difficult as well. It probably means that the work of Jesus will reveal the truth about God to the world, which would expose sin and evil within humanity, including the sins that prevented God's own people from enjoying the full benefits of a relationship with Him.

## Application

There are several features of this passage worth our close attention; firstly, the devout nature of Simeon. It is surely worth holding him up as an example of someone whose life was lived in dedication to a specific calling of God. It is likely that far more people have a special calling than realise it, and many search for a calling when God has already challenged them with what he wants of them, but they have rejected it. It may sound harsh of me to say this, but years of counselling people have led me to this conclusion. It is always wonderful to come across someone who knows what the Lord requires of them and lives by it with total integrity, and the mark of this is often acceptance amongst other Christians. It is obvious when people live a life that is at peace with God; it shows, and it is an example to others.

This Scripture is also worth examining by anyone who wishes to try and find an overview of God's work of salvation. The various phrases of this passage cover many of the great themes of God's saving grace. Some of these words are salvation, redemption, light, revelation, and glory; some of the themes are the Holy Spirit, praising God, 'according to Your Word', 'the glory of Your people Israel', 'the fall and the rise of many', and much more.

The whole passage is remarkably whole in its presentation of God's salvation, because on the one hand, it reveals the glorious truth of God's desire to be a *'light for revelation to the Gentiles'* (2:32), but it does not shy away from the painful truth that salvation comes at a cost. Salvation comes with God's judgement, and with the price of the redemption of all humanity paid by God through the death of His Son Jesus on the Cross. Scripture never attempts to deceive us with niceties, it only asks us to face the truth about God and His plans for us and all the world.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Check out the references to the Spirit in this passage and discuss what they mean in your group.
2. What does this passage of Scripture tell you about the work that God intends to do through Jesus? Is this what you expect?
3. How would you respond to this text if you were Mary? Would this fill you with fear or joy; discuss this and explain your feelings to your group.

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *The nature of God's salvation*
- *The presence of the Holy Spirit within the essential work of God*
- *Simeon's prophecy about the work of Jesus*
- *Simeon's blessing of Jesus and His warnings*

### **Personal comments by author**

*It is a great of privilege to hold prophetic knowledge by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Simeon's experience of this is by no means unique. Throughout time, God has revealed His will to people throughout time in words of prophecy or words of knowledge, and He has entrusted us with these things not so that we can brag about them, but so that His will is done in the world. It is important that we are faithful to our call and to any prophetic word that has been revealed to us; and it is the privilege of every disciple to be a bearer of God's Word of Salvation, just like Simeon.*

## ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Reflect on the idea of prophecy and your own ideas about what it means. If possible, use a Bible dictionary or the internet to explore what prophecy means, and research this with care, letting God help you discern what is right and wrong in what you find.*
  - *Pray for God's church to hear and receive both the prophecies and blessings it receives, and respond to the spiritual messages that the Lord wants to give His people.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Jesus, we give You our praise, knowing that nothing is beyond Your infinite majesty; for You know our minds, touch our hearts, see with our eyes and sense our feelings. Make Yourself known to us in even the most insignificant of moments, and guide us by the power of Your love. AMEN

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