

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You are the source of everything:
We praise You for the new life we find in Jesus Christ
We praise You for the hope of our eternal salvation
We praise You for the love shown by God the Father
Lord God Almighty, You are the source of life within us: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look at the faces of the various people you see today, and ask God to bless them, one by one

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *Pray today for those who organise things and keep the church running smoothly, week by week.*
- *Pray for Nigeria and for the health of President Umaru Yar'Adua*
- *Give thanks to God for the many opportunities He has given you*

Meditation

Where may the human spirit begin to find peace?

In the company of others who believe?

Whilst doing the work of the Kingdom?

In a home where love and care abide?

Lost in worship, in 'wonder love and praise'?

On the streets where Jesus kept His company?

Speaking out, where possible, for the oppressed?

In a quiet place of Bible study and prayer?

Walking with a trusted friend from the past?

Or may peace be found when we realise

That God is there in every circumstance of life,

And peace comes when we see Him with open eyes,

For anytime, anywhere, everywhere; He is there.

Bible passage – Luke 2:36-40

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old, having lived with her husband for just seven years of marriage, ³⁷ and then as a widow until her eighty-fourth year. She never left the temple but worshiped there night and day, with fasting and prayer. ³⁸ She came at that very moment, and began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had done everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to their own town of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Bible Study

Review

These few verses complete the early stories of Jesus' infancy, leaving us with the story of Jesus' first Passover in Jerusalem (2:41-52) to complete Luke chapter 2 (to be read tomorrow). The first paragraph of our text describes the touching instance of the praise and worship of God by Anna, on hearing of the baby Jesus in the Temple (2:38). This story complements that of the story of Simeon, and despite its brevity, it is relatively revealing. The second paragraph reports that Joseph, Mary and Jesus left Jerusalem to go to 'Nazareth in Galilee' (2:39), a somewhat unexpected choice for the raising of the Messiah. Nevertheless, Luke confirms that Jesus '*became strong ... was filled with wisdom ... the grace of God was on Him*' (2:40). The work of God was already becoming evident in the life of Jesus.

The figure of Anna has always been of interest. It is sometimes said that Anna is not a proper prophet because she did not say anything here in Luke's Gospel that can be regarded as prophecy; in contrast to Simeon, who prophesied about the work of Jesus as the Messiah (2:30-32,34,35). Unfortunately, this rests on a misunderstanding of what the Bible means by prophesy. Prophesy is the communication of God's Word to His people, and unless we accept this, then it is hard to say that the prophetic books of the Old Testament contain just 'prophesy'. Anna is a prophet when she publicly announces blessing and thanksgiving for the presence of the Messiah in the Temple (2:38).

Anna did not take Jesus or hold Him, and she did not bless Him as a person or speak to Mary and Joseph. Luke tells us that she; '*began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*' (2:38). A great deal hangs on this sentence. If you check out the translation notes (below), you will discover that the praise Anna offered was not the usual 'praise' offered in the Temple in the sense of ritual worship. Luke uses a word that specifically refers to giving public testimony to a good deed, in this case done by God. Anna, as a woman, could not offer formal praise to God in the Temple; she could not go into the courtyard where men took part in Temple worship. As a prophetess, she did what she could, which was to tell other people about Jesus, and this is what she did.

This testimony was significant, because Anna was known in the Temple as one who was very old, '*having lived with her husband for just seven years of marriage ... and then until her eighty fourth year.*' There is some uncertainty about how old Anna was (see below), but the Old Testament demonstrates that God often used elderly women, and in the first century AD widows who devoted themselves to worship '*day and night*' (2:37) were specially honoured. It is possible that Anna had been given lodgings within the Temple because of her widowhood, age, and devotion, but we do not know this for sure. It is far more important for us to recognise the significance of Anna's testimony; with Simeon, she was one of the two witnesses (required by the Law – see Deuteronomy 19:1) to the coming of the infant Jesus to the Temple.

After Jesus was born, everything was done for His proper inclusion into a Jewish family, according to the Law. In later times, Jesus would go beyond the law to minister to others, but he was brought up a Jew, and his family settled in Nazareth, a town in the hill country of Galilee (Luke has already informed us that Mary and Joseph came from Nazareth – 1:26,2:4).

At this point, we are left with a quandary, knowing that Matthew tells us that Jesus' family went to Egypt before returning to Nazareth. We must accept that Luke does not record this because it is not necessary for his story. All the Gospel writers leave out vast tracts of Jesus' early life, so the information we have can fit together in a number of ways, though we do not know how! We must be content with the Gospels as they are told!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Anna the prophetess
- Anna's worship and the redemption of Jerusalem
- The character of Jesus

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V38 '*began to praise God*'

The Greek word used here is a special word which does not usually refer to religious worship. It usually means giving public praise and acknowledgement for some good work that has been done by someone, and it therefore carries the sense of recognition, good deeds and public pronouncement. It seems that Luke has used this word to bring this kind of emphasis to Anna's worshipful thanks to God (see study).

Significant phrases

V37 'until her eighty fourth year'

Other translations:

'until she was eighty-four' (NIV)

'to the age of eighty-four' (NRSV)

Although this is not very clear to us in English, the Greek is entirely unclear about whether Anna lived eighty four years after her husband died or until her eighty fourth year! From the point of view of correct grammar, it could be one or the other. Most versions only translate 'until she was eighty four', because the idea of someone living eighty four years beyond becoming a widow (making her well over one hundred years old) seems inconceivable. However, we should perhaps reflect that there are plenty of stories in Scripture of remarkable things happening in the lives of people who are extremely old!

V38 'the redemption of Jerusalem'

Other translations:

'redemption in Jerusalem' (Authorised Version)

The Greek reads 'of Jerusalem', but this is rather unexpected. The rest of the prophecies about Jesus in the early chapters of Luke make it very clear that Jesus was to be the Saviour of the world (e.g. 2:32,33), not just one city! For this reason, the translators of the Authorised Version changed the text to read 'in Jerusalem', thus anticipating Jesus' redemptive death in the city. Other translations, including mine, assume that Jerusalem here stands for the redeemed Kingdom of God, as it does in Revelation 21; only in this way can it be true to speak of the 'redemption of Jerusalem'.

Going Deeper

Anna the prophetess

According to Israelite tradition, there were seven female prophets in Israel; Sarah (Genesis 17,18f.), Miriam (Exodus 15:20, Numbers 12), Deborah (Judges 4,5), Hannah (1 Samuel 1,2), Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chron 34:22) and Esther (the book of Esther). Anna therefore continues into the New Testament a noble and proper tradition of female prophets who spoke the word of God. Not all these women spoke what we could easily recognise as 'prophecy', but if we read their stories, each of them delivered God's Word by word or deed in a powerful way. Luke saw Anna as the first prophetess of the new era of God's Kingdom.

Interestingly, Anna's name is a form of the Hebrew name 'Hannah', and she is said to have been from the tribe of 'Asher'. This tribe was one of the ten 'lost' tribes of Israel, dispersed by the Assyrians from the northern parts of Israel in 721BC. A few remnants of these tribes were gathered together after the Babylonian exile of the Judean people, in order to try and re-gather all the twelve tribes of God's people (see Ezra 6:17, Ezekiel 47:13). Nevertheless, Asher was not a common tribe, giving a greater sense of tragedy to Anna's widowhood. She made up for her loss by worshipping God and waiting for God's salvation.

Anna's worship and the redemption of Jerusalem

There is ample evidence from the various documents found in the Middle East (including the famous 'Dead Sea Scrolls') that a wide range of views were held by people in the first centuries BC and AD about the Messiah and his coming. It is therefore quite possible that Anna (and Simeon) were indeed loyalist Jews who worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem and had special beliefs about the coming of God's Messiah. Luke describes each of them as filled with the Holy Spirit, but it is likely that people in their day did not regard them as more holy than a multitude of other devout Jews with their beliefs about the Messiah.

Luke points out these two because they happened to be right, and the justification of a true prophet, according to the Old Testament, was that what they said came true. By telling the story of Simeon and Anna, Luke was reinforcing the point that God was always at work in the midst of the mêlée of voices within human society, but it was important for people to judge what is right and wrong. Looking back on the life of Christ, he could say with confidence that Simeon and Anna, amongst all the other voices speaking about the future of the world, happened to be right, proved by the life and death of Jesus. Anna's hope for the redemption of Israel was a real hope to her, and she believed it had come in Jesus; and she was right. Others may well have laughed at her.

The character of Jesus

This passage in Luke (2:39-51) is the only Gospel story about the childhood of Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, there is a record of Mary, Joseph and Jesus travelling to Egypt to escape Herod's anger at the prospect of the birth of a new 'king' in Israel, but here in Luke, that event is passed over. After the stories of Jesus' birth (2:1-38), we hear of the family settling in Nazareth (in agreement with the story in Matthew – see Matt. 2:23 and Luke 2:39).

The past verse of our passage today is remarkable but brief passage about the growth of Jesus, who grew in 'strength, wisdom and grace' (2:40). It is natural that Luke should start with strength, but the next two features are very interesting. Wisdom normally refers to the classic teaching of the Old Testament designed for young people. The book of Proverbs, for example, is called a book of 'Wisdom', and it is presented as like a text book for learning about life, with God as the supreme author of life and of founder of all wisdom. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament was never regarded as of the same importance as the Law or the prophets, but it was designed to give practical examples of godly and moral living. Certainly, Jesus would have grown up being introduced to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and these instructions for how to live as God required.

The last quality ascribed to Jesus is grace. Grace is one of those words people find it hard to define, but it derives from the idea of favour and goodness. For example, God shows 'grace' to us by acting favourably on our behalf by forgiving our sins through Jesus; the practical side of grace is the work of Christ, but the gracious attitude of God is His favour. In the case of the growing Jesus, Luke says He grew in grace to explain to us that God's favour rested upon Him in an exclusive way as His Son; and like all grace, it showed in real life.

Application

The mention of Anna is only brief, but nevertheless important. Anna did what she could to speak about Jesus and His presence in the Temple, and this was the special gift of a woman. In days when men and women did not mix in public, it was important that Anna gave public testimony to Jesus, for unless she did this, how would the women of Jerusalem and the rest of Judea know that the Messiah had come? We live today with the glad assumption that men and women have equal knowledge of what is happening in the world around them; but unfortunately, we only have to look at the Muslim world to see what it is like when men and women live in different worlds. God needs all people to know about His Word and about His Saviour.

The last verse of this passage is a great source of spiritual guidance, and one that is possibly not well used or understood. Jesus' growth in strength, wisdom and grace is a model for all young people, and many models of education and training practiced in schools of various countries would do well to focus of these qualities. For example, young people need to understand and focus their growing and changing bodies, and they are challenged by all that happens to them in their teenage years. If we leave the physical growth of young people to what they perceive from films and television, then they will not have a mature understanding of their adult strength in body mind or spirit.

Neither are characteristics such as wisdom and grace to be despised; they need to be exemplified by adults, in the home, in school and in all areas of life. The church has a great opportunity to help young people in every age and place to achieve their god-given potential by demonstrating that God's ways (as found here in the life of Jesus) show the way to maturity, confidence and faith in adult life. There is much for God's people to do, and Jesus shows us the way.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach us about Jesus, His growth and His ministry?
2. What does prophecy mean, and how can we learn from the way this passage refers to Anna as a prophetess?
3. What do the characteristics of Jesus tell us about Him and His growth in Nazareth? Is this important for understanding of the Messiah?

Topics covered by this text

- *The prophetess Anna, and the subject of prophecy*
- *The nature of praise and testimony*

- *Godly characteristics in growth*

Personal comments by author

Here, Anna appears suddenly in the story of Jesus with a message of great importance, and then disappears again! The Lord continues to work in this way today, and He will inspire Godly people to speak words of knowledge and prophecy to others at critical times for them. Such words and prophecies can be of great importance, and it is right that within the church, we should be prepared to receive such guidance, and respect the means by which they come.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Consider how God has used others to bring His word to you, and how He could use you to bring a word to others.*
- *Pray for those who do not know the news about Jesus' presence in the world as the Son of God, and ask the Lord to reveal to His people how this message can be brought to a suffering and divided world.*

Final Prayer

At the end of a day, when good things have happened and the worst has been overcome, may we rest in the knowledge that You have been our guide, Lord Jesus. Then, in full confidence of Your love and power, lead us into tomorrow with faith and without fear. AMEN
