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CHRIST, THE HOPE OF THE WORLD

Luke 2:25-35

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December 19, 2004

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Christmas Message

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During World War II, six pilots took off from an aircraft carrier in the North Atlantic to scout some enemy submarines. While they were gone, the captain of the carrier was forced to issue a blackout alarm. The ship went totally dark.

When the pilots tried to return, they could not find the ship. They radioed, "Give us some light, we're coming home." The ship's radio operator replied, "Order: blackout. I cannot give you light." In turn, each pilot desperately radioed the same message: "Just give me some light and I'll make it." Each time, the operator had to radio back, "No light—blackout!" Because there was no light on that ship, six young pilots went to their graves in the icy North Atlantic (adapted from, Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers], # 5366).

We live in a dark world that desperately needs light. The birth of Jesus Christ, who is God's salvation, brought the light that offers hope to a world of despair.

Soon after Jesus was forty-days-old, His parents brought Him into the temple in Jerusalem, in accordance with the Law of Moses, to offer the appropriate sacrifice for Him as their firstborn male (Lev. 12:8; 5:11; Exod. 13:2, 12). It was a common sight. Most people in the temple precincts that day ignored this poor, common couple and their baby. But the face of one old man, Simeon, lit up with rapturous joy. He came up to this couple, took their baby in his arms, looked heavenward, and exclaimed (Luke 2:29-32),

Now, Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

Here is an old man with true light and true hope, centered in that little baby, the Lord Jesus Christ. Simeon did not possess unusual genius or powers of perception. The text (2:26) says that the

Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ. The Spirit led Simeon into the temple that day at precisely the time that Joseph and Mary came with the baby Jesus (2:27). The Spirit obviously revealed to Simeon, "There He is! That little baby is the One!"

If Simeon had been relying on his natural powers, he would have missed Him. He would have been looking for a royal procession, with all of the pomp and circumstance attending the child of the king. The high priest and the Sanhedrin would have been swarming around the procession.

Instead, all that he saw was a carpenter, his young wife, and their baby. There was no halo over Jesus' head. But the Spirit directed Simeon to approach this ordinary-looking couple and their ordinary-looking baby. With eyes of faith, Simeon saw in their arms the Light of the world, born to bring hope to all peoples. To see Him today, you must also look with eyes of faith that have been opened by God's Spirit. Pray that God would grant you eyes to see what many miss (Luke 10:21-24).

Before we look more carefully at this story, I want to remind you that it is not a fairy tale or legend. Luke begins his Gospel by telling his first reader, Theophilus, that he has investigated everything carefully and written it out "so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4). Luke probably interviewed Mary to get the details about these early events in the life of her Son. This account is factual history, not make-believe. That's important to keep in mind, because hope based on fairy tales is not solid hope. Hope built on truth will do for you what it did for Simeon: It will release you to die in peace.

I want to answer the question: *What does it mean to hope in Christ?* How can we know the hope that flooded this old saint about 2,000 years ago? His story shows that...

To hope in Christ is to recognize and personally trust Him as God's salvation.

In order to hope in Christ, first...

1. We must recognize Jesus for who He is: God's Christ, the only way of salvation.

The most crucial question in life for each person to answer is the one Jesus asked His disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). *Everything* hangs on the correct answer to that question! If Jesus is who He claimed to be, then we must bow before Him as the Sovereign Lord and yield all that we are and have to His service. If He is not who He claimed to be, then our faith is worthless. You're free to live as you please (1 Cor. 15:14, 32).

Peter gave the correct answer to Jesus' question: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus affirmed that answer, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-17). To recognize and believe in Jesus as God's Christ, the Father must open our blind eyes. Jesus, born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy (Mic. 5:2), is the Lord's Christ.

Christ and *Messiah* are synonyms for the word *anoint* (*Christ* from the Greek; *Messiah* from the Hebrew). Jesus is God's Anointed One, promised for thousands of years in the Old Testament. Psalm 2 identifies God's Anointed One as His Son and promises that He will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:7, 9; Rev. 19:15).

Luke says that Simeon was looking for "the consolation of Israel," a term for the Messiah taken from Isaiah 40:1-3:

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God."

That last verse refers to the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist (Luke 3:4-6). The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that this baby in Mary's arms was "the Lord's Christ, the consolation of Israel"! Simeon's prayer reveals three essential truths about Jesus:

A. God prepared Christ as a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of His people Israel (2:32).

God *prepared* salvation. This means that it comes *totally* from Him, according to His purpose for the ages. It is not the result of brilliant men philosophizing about how we can get to heaven.

Rather, it is God's *revelation* of the plan of salvation that *He* devised. "All peoples" (2:31) refers to the whole world. God's salvation through Jesus is not exclusively for the Jews, but *through them* to all the nations. Verse 32 is probably best understood to mean that Christ, who is God's salvation (2:30), would be light for all people, but in particular, revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Israel (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 1:244). In Luke 1:78-79, Zecharias had prophesied that Jesus was "the Sunrise from on high" who would "visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Israel, as well as the Gentiles, needed the light of Christ.

The Bible is clear that as fallen sinners, both Jews and Gentiles are spiritually blind (Matt. 13:14-15; 15:14; John 9:39-41; Eph. 4:18). As such, they cannot know what God is like by philosophy or reason. Not knowing what God is like, they cannot exercise their "free will" to come to God, any more than a blind man can choose to see. Spiritually blind people need an infusion of supernatural power in order to see.

In the Old Testament, God chose to reveal Himself to the Jews, and through them to bring the Savior who would be a light to the nations. He told Israel (Isa. 42:6-7),

"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison."

So Jesus, God's Christ, is the light to the whole world, but He is in particular the glory for Israel in that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22; see also, Rom. 9:1-5). But, as we know, and as Simeon alludes to (Luke 2:34-35), the Jews as a people would reject their Messiah.

But as Paul explains (Romans 11), God used Israel's rejection of Christ to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles. He brought a temporary hardening on Israel, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. But then, all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:25-26). I understand that to mean that just prior to Christ's return, there will be a widespread revival among the Jews. Today, the Jews in Israel are

about 80 percent atheistic and most of the rest, like the Pharisees, reject Jesus and trust in their own legalistic righteousness. But, the day will come when, as the Lord says (Zech. 12:10; 13:1),

I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a first-born.... In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.

Thus Jesus is the Light, and His coming served as “revelation to the Gentiles.” He revealed God’s way of salvation to all the nations in a way that was revealed only to the Jews before His coming. He also serves as “the glory of [His] people Israel.” His coming fulfilled God’s many promises to bring the Savior through the nation of Israel (Isa. 46:13; 60:1-3). But, also,

B. God prepared Christ to bring judgment on all that oppose Him.

Simeon tells Mary (2:34-35), “Behold, this *Child* is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” This is the first hint in Luke’s Gospel that Christ’s coming would not bring salvation and peace to everyone. Note first the word, *appointed* (2:34). That word assures us that the evil men who opposed and crucified Jesus did not somehow thwart God’s sovereign plan. He appointed Jesus for the cross, and yet those that crucified Him were responsible for their evil deeds (see Acts 2:24; 4:27-28).

Scholars debate whether verse 34 refers to one or two groups. If the former, the meaning is that those who stand in their spiritual pride must fall before Jesus before they can rise in salvation. If the latter, it means that Jesus will divide men. Those who oppose Him will fall in judgment. Those who accept Him will rise in salvation (Leon Morris, *Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 89). While both views are true spiritually, probably the second view is the sense here (Bock, p. 247).

The next phrase, "a sign to be opposed," underscores the fact that although Jesus is the Christ, the hope of Israel, many would oppose and reject Him. He would also reveal the "thoughts from many hearts." *Thoughts* has the nuance of hostile thoughts (Bock, p. 250). Jesus' life and ministry would expose the inner hostility of those that opposed Him.

The point is, you can't be neutral toward Jesus Christ. He draws a line in the sand and demands that you take sides. Either you acknowledge Him as God's Christ, submit your life to His absolute lordship, and "rise" in salvation. Or, you think, "I'll do it my way," and you will "fall" in judgment. *Everything* hinges on the correct answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Simeon's words point to a third truth here:

C. God prepared Christ to bring salvation through His death.

Simeon parenthetically tells Mary, "a sword will pierce even your own soul." There are at least ten views of what this may mean (Bock, pp. 248-249). I believe that it refers to the extreme anguish that Mary felt when she saw her Son rejected and crucified (Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke* [Charles Scribner's Sons], pp. 70-71).

Immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus declared that, "He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Matt. 16:21). God's plan in sending His Son in human flesh was that He would die as the sacrifice that God's justice demands for our sins. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), which means, eternal separation from God. Either you trust Jesus' death as payment for your sins now, or you will pay that penalty yourself.

So the first thing is to ask God for eyes to see Jesus as God's Christ, the only way of salvation.

2. We must personally trust Christ as God's salvation.

Simeon had *already* trusted God's Christ as his salvation *before* he saw the baby Jesus. His hope rested in God's promise to send the Savior. When he saw Jesus, he recognized Him as the fulfillment of God's specific promise, that he would not die before he had seen the Christ. Thus he could exclaim, "Now Lord, you are

releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word" (2:29). In seeing Jesus, Simeon saw God's salvation (2:30).

Simeon had to see Jesus *by faith*. There was nothing physically extraordinary about Jesus or Mary and Joseph. There was no halo and no parade of dignitaries marching behind this baby. All that Simeon had was God's word and the Holy Spirit's revelation. Simeon trusted God's word, and therefore he overflows with hope in this little baby as God's Christ, His salvation.

If you have looked to Jesus in faith as your only hope of God's salvation, then with Simeon, you are ready to depart from this earth in peace. If you have not done so, if you view Jesus as perhaps a great religious leader, but not as God's salvation, you are in spiritual darkness, opposed to Him. Your response to Jesus Christ reveals the thoughts of your heart (2:36).

Conclusion

Maybe you're wondering, "*How can I know if my hope and trust are truly in Christ?*" A glance at Simeon's life (this is the only time he is mentioned in Scripture) shows us seven characteristics of the person who trusts Jesus as God's salvation. Not all of these qualities will be immediately evident, but they will be developing in the one who hopes in Christ. Check yourself against this list:

- (1) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you seek to live a righteous and devout life.

Simeon is described as "righteous and devout" (2:25), which refers to his character. *Righteous* means that his behavior in the sight of God and towards his fellow man was in accordance with God's standards. Both in private and in public, Simeon sought to obey God. *Devout* has the connotation of *reverent* or *careful*. Simeon was careful about his relationship to God. While we can skim over those two words in an instant, they reflect a lifetime of cultivation. These qualities do not just happen accidentally. They reflect a deliberate commitment to live in a manner pleasing to God.

- (2) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned three times in 2:25-27. It is obvious that Simeon's life was marked by dependence on God's

Spirit, and this was *before* the Day of Pentecost! Since that day, all that trust Christ as Savior possess the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9). We are commanded to walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), which means consciously to depend on Him in every step we take. Would you have missed the Spirit if He had withdrawn from your life last week?

- (3) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you view yourself as God's servant.

Simeon (2:29) calls God by a title that is not used often in the New Testament, "Sovereign Lord" (NIV; NASB, "Lord"). We get our word *despot* from it. It has the nuance of "absolute ownership and uncontrolled power" (*Thayer's Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Harper & Brothers, 1887], p. 130). Simeon refers to himself as the Lord's *bond-servant*. Bond-servants were the property of their masters and had no personal rights. Everyone bought by the precious blood of Christ recognizes, "you are not your own[?] For you have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

- (4) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you have insight into spiritual truth.

Through the Holy Spirit, Simeon understood far more than the religious leaders of the day. He knew that this child in his arms was the promised Christ. He knew that not all would welcome Him, but that there would be much opposition, resulting in deep anguish for Mary. He knew that God's Messiah was also given as a light to the Gentiles, something that the early church had to grapple with up through the Jerusalem Council! Paul explains that while the natural man cannot understand the things of God, the spiritual man appraises all things, because "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:14-16).

- (5) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you bless God for sending Jesus to this earth.

When this dear old saint held the baby Jesus in his arms, he blessed God for fulfilling His promises. Everyone who has trusted Christ as Savior is filled with thanksgiving to God "for His indescribable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

- (6) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you are satisfied with Jesus alone.

All that Simeon needed in life was to hold Jesus in his arms. That one moment in the temple, holding God's Savior, made all his life worth living. It satisfied his soul so that he had accomplished all that he aimed at in life. With the psalmist, Simeon could say, "besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Ps. 73:25b). With Paul, Christ was Simeon's "all in all" (Col. 3:11). When you have trusted Christ, you are satisfied with all that He is to you!

(7) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you are ready to depart this life in peace.

Simeon's words picture a sentinel who had been given the assignment of keeping watch through a long, dark night for the rising of a special star. Finally, he sees the star rising in its brightness. He announces it to his commander and has fulfilled his duty. He can now take his rest (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Eerdmans], p. 119). When you've trusted in Christ as Savior, you know that you are right with God. Your eyes have seen the light of His salvation. When He gives the word, you are ready to depart this life and be with Him forever.

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, but you must put your hope in Him personally. *To hope in Christ means recognizing and personally trusting Him as God's salvation.*

If Christ is your salvation, you can have hope no matter how difficult your circumstances. During World War II, some American prisoners in a German concentration camp secretly received word of the Allied victory three days before the Germans heard of it. During those three days, their circumstances were no different. They still suffered all the hardships that they had become used to. But their attitude changed dramatically. A wave of hope spread among the prisoners. Victory and liberation were assured! They could endure those last three days because they had hope.

Whether you're suffering from a difficult disease or grieving the loss of a loved one or facing overwhelming trials of some other nature, you can have hope if you will trust Jesus Christ as God's salvation for you. He has won the victory. Those who hope in Him will not be disappointed!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is “who do you say that I am?” the most important question in the world?
2. Some say that if spiritually blind people do not have the ability to open their eyes, God is unfair to judge them for not opening their eyes. How would you refute this error (with Scripture)?
3. How can a believer be filled with the Holy Spirit? Is it a growing process or a “pull the lever” kind of matter?
4. Can a person “accept Jesus as Savior,” but not as Lord? Why must the two always be joined?

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