

January 7 Lesson

Today we read about the naming of Jesus and his presentation at the temple. As you recall from January 3, the angel Gabriel told Mary, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus” (Luke 1:31). The Greek word for Jesus is *Iêsous*, and this reflects the Hebrew *Yeshua* (Joshua) which means “Yahweh saves.” As in the case of John the Baptist, the name Jesus was not his father’s name (indeed, no one in Jesus’ genealogies had that name). So when Joseph and Mary named their firstborn son Jesus, it was an act of faith and obedience to God’s command.

Now, Jesus was circumcised in accordance with the Mosaic Law, which required all male children to be circumcised on the eighth day (Lev 12:3). As you know from Genesis, male circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham (Gen 17:11–12). This command was repeated by God to Moses at Mount Sinai with more instructions concerning the purification of the mother (Lev 12). Note that circumcision was also a physical symbol of the spiritual cleansing of the heart that takes place at salvation (cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4). As the narrative continues, you’ll notice that Luke highlights the fact that Joseph and Mary were careful to fulfill all that the Law required for their son (cf. Luke 2:21–24, 27, 39a).

So, why did Joseph and Mary wait until Jesus’ circumcision to name him? In the OT and in Judaism, the normal time to name a child appears to have been at birth (Gen 25:25–26).¹ However, Abram received the name *Abraham* when he was circumcised, and it may be that the presence of witnesses for the circumcision was useful to confirm that the name “Jesus” was authentic (remember that John the Baptist was named at his circumcision, and the witnesses were very surprised when he wasn’t named after his father; cf. Luke 1:59–63).

So, what does it mean when it says, “When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses” (Luke 2:22)? Well, in Leviticus 12, God said that a mother who bore a son would be ritually unclean for 40 days after the birth.² Now, why would a mother become ritually impure by giving birth? Certainly not because having children was viewed negatively. God had commanded mankind to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Gen 1:28; 9:7), and the Israelites universally saw children as a gift from the Lord (Gen 33:5; Ps 127:3). So why the ritual impurity? Because of the loss of blood involved: *The woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding* (Lev 12:4 NIV).³

This leads to a second question: Why would losing blood cause ritual impurity? In many cultures, both ancient and modern, the loss of bodily fluids is ritually defiling (cf. Lev 15:16–18). Some cultures have their own explanations for why this is the case, while others simply assume it as fact, without providing a rationale. The Bible doesn’t tell us why losing blood caused ritual impurity; God simply asserted the fact and provided a way for the mother to be restored to a ritually clean state. One possible explanation is that the period of ritual impurity allowed the mother plenty of time to recover physically from the ordeal of giving birth.

When the 40 days were complete, the Law required the mother to come to the entrance of the tabernacle and give the priest the animals for a burnt offering and a purification (sin) offering (Lev 12:6–8). For Joseph and Mary, this meant a trip to the temple in Jerusalem (about 5½ miles to the north). The

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 166.

² For a boy, the mother was contagiously ritually unclean for 7 days (14 days for a girl), then simply ritually unclean for 33 days (66 days for a girl).

³ Jay Sklar, *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 3, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 175.

Law also required that all firstborn males were to be consecrated (set apart as holy) to God (Exod 13:2).⁴ So their visit to the temple allowed them to fulfill everything the Law required for their son. Now, you'll notice that Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary offered a pair of birds. This was a provision for those who couldn't afford a lamb for the burnt offering (Lev 12:8). This means Joseph and Mary were not wealthy, and it also means that this took place before the Magi presented their gifts (the gift of gold would have enabled them to afford the more costly lamb for the burnt offering).

While they were at the temple, Mary and Joseph met a man named Simeon. Who was this guy? We know very little about him. His name meant "God has heard," and it was a common name since it was the name of one of Jacob's sons (Gen 29:33). It is likely that he was old (implied by saying he is ready to die after seeing the Messiah; Luke 2:29). He seems to be a simple man, a layman, not a priest, and he lived in Jerusalem. It's interesting that God leaves out the details of Simeon's background and focuses instead on his spiritual condition: he was "righteous and devout" (Luke 2:25). This is the same word used of Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6). Simeon was right with God, and he was careful and conscientious in following the Law (cf. Acts 2:5; 22:12 on "devout"). Who you are with respect to God is the most important thing about you.

Luke also tells us that he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25b). What does that mean? This phrase comes from Isaiah, where God promised that just as he would comfort Israel by raising up Cyrus to save them from Babylon (Isa 41:2, 25; 43:14; 44:28; 45:1-6; 46:1-2; 47:11; 48:14-15, 20), so he would also comfort them by raising up his Servant, the Messiah, to save them from their sins (Isa 40:1; 41:14; 42:1-4; 43:1, 25; 44:22; 49:5-6, 13; 52:9; 54:1). Thus "waiting for the consolation of Israel" was another way of saying "waiting for the coming of the Messiah."

How did Simeon know that Jesus was in the temple? Luke tells us that "he came in the Spirit into the temple" (Luke 2:27a). This means that the Holy Spirit spoke to Simeon and told him what to do (some people don't think the Spirit leads us or speaks to us, so this is a great example of refuting that idea). It also means that the Holy Spirit was active in the lives of believers ("upon him," "revealed to him by the Holy Spirit," "came in the Spirit") prior to Jesus' death and resurrection. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit took on the new role of helper/comforter to Christ's body, the Church, but before that, he was very much active in believer's lives (cf. Judges 3:10; 6:34; Ps 51:11).

Simeon took Jesus in his arms (amazing thought, holding the Messiah as a baby) and thanked God for keeping his promise: "My eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:30).⁵ All those promises in Isaiah where God said he would save his people (Isa 45:17, 22; 46:13; 49:6; 52:10), all of them find their Yes! in Jesus (2 Cor 1:20). And what kind of salvation is this? Is it just for Israel, God's chosen people? No, this salvation is "prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:31-32). This echoes Isaiah 42:6 (the call of the Messiah) and Isaiah 49:6 (the commission of the Messiah) where God promised to make the Messiah a "light for the nations" that "my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."⁶ Simeon was holding the salvation of the world in his arms!

Simeon then blessed Mary and Joseph. Let's pause here—Simeon blessed God (Luke 2:28), and now he blesses them, so what does that mean, what does it mean to bless someone? The word is *eulogéō* and it means to speak well of someone, to praise them (Zechariah of God in Luke 1:64; likely what Simeon did of God in Luke 2:28). It also has the sense of conferring the favor or approval of God on someone or something; I think that's what Simeon was doing to Joseph and Mary, he was asking God to favor them and prosper them (Luke 2:34).

⁴ Numbers 18:15-16 required that all firstborn males be redeemed with five shekels of silver, but Luke doesn't mention any redemption for Jesus. Views on this include: 1) just a matter of silence, 2) Jesus was presented for service to God like Samuel so no redemption was needed, 3) Jesus was already holy from birth so he did not need to be redeemed.

⁵ Known as the *Nunc Dimittis* ("Now Lord") a name that comes from the hymn's opening phrase in the Latin version.

⁶ Messiah sections: Call—Isaiah 42:1-9; Commission—Isaiah 49:1-13; Commitment—Isaiah 50:4-11; Career—Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

And then he said some fascinating things to Mary. Let's unpack what he said. First, he said, "This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34b). What does that mean? Well, again we go to Isaiah for the context. In speaking of the Messiah, Isaiah said, "And he [the Messiah] will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken" (Isa 8:14-15; cf. Rom 9:33). Isaiah also said, "Look, I have laid a stone in Zion [the Messiah], a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; the one who believes will be unshakable" (Isa 28:16 HCSB; cf. Rom 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6). So, those who accepted and believed in the Messiah would be laid on him, an unshakable foundation, while those who rejected him would stumble and fall over him to their ruin (cf. Ps 118:22). Simeon thus reminds Mary that the Messiah would not be a conquering hero followed by all; rather, her son would be a point of contention and division for Israel (cf. Matt 21:42-44).

Then Simeon said, "This child is appointed...for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34c-35). What is this sign that is opposed? Well, Simeon is saying that Jesus' ministry as the Messiah will be opposed. This also has its context in Isaiah, where the prophet makes it clear that the Messiah would be resisted and ultimately rejected by Israel (Isa 50:6-8; 52:14; 53:3, 5, 7-9). This would mean testing for Mary herself, for she would also have to choose to trust in Jesus and believe in him as the Messiah (something that turned out to be difficult; cf. Mark 3:20-21; John 7:1-5). Because she was his mother, she would also keenly feel the rejection and opposition that was directed at him, and it would be very painful. And why would this happen? Why would Israel reject the one that was sent to save them, the one they claimed to be eagerly awaiting? Because of the condition of their hearts—they weren't truly right with God. And Jesus' ministry would expose this, it would reveal the stony and weed-choked ground of the hearts of so many Jews (John 8:42-44).

No sooner had Simeon finished speaking to Joseph and Mary, than Anna (Hannah = "grace") the prophetess appeared. Now what is a prophetess? A prophetess is a female prophet, and a prophet is someone who speaks for God—God gives them the words to say and they speak God's message to the people (cf. Jer 1:4-10). We usually think of a prophet as someone who predicts the future, but that is only a part of being a prophet. God's message may or may not contain revelation about the future; the main point of being a prophet is to speak what God wants you to say.⁷

Anna was a widow—she had been married for seven years and then lived as a widow until the age of eighty-four.⁸ Luke tells us, "She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day" (Luke 2:37). This doesn't mean that Anna lived in the temple (she was from the tribe of Asher, not Levi), just that she was there all the time, every day. And she came up to Mary and Joseph at just that moment. In the massive temple complex, she just happened to find them at the right time. This was no doubt the leading of the Spirit. She, too, recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and giving thanks to God, she was talking with everyone who was looking for the coming of the Messiah ("the redemption of Jerusalem"). I love that Anna's reaction to the good news was to tell others, to evangelize. Spreading the gospel is indeed the best way to honor God's great gift!

⁷ The normal modern use of the word "prophecy" usually refers to predictions of the future, but to "prophesy" simply means to speak God's word, whatever that may be. While God usually speaks through men, he also speaks through women (e.g., Deborah in Judges 4:4; Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14; Isaiah's wife in Isaiah 8:3; the daughters of Philip in Acts 21:9; Pentecost in Acts 2:17-18).

⁸ Some think the eighty-four refers to the numbers of years she lived as a widow, making her 105 if she married at the age of 14.