

Luke 2:21-38
Presentation and Testimony

In the U. S. court system, witnesses play a crucial role. Whether they testify to the facts of the case, or the character of the participant, they lend support to the arguments being made. In ancient Israel, they had a rule of law as well. Deuteronomy 19:15, “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.” In this passage, we see how God worked within His own legal system as He provided witnesses to give testimony of the birth of the Messiah.

Circumcision

“And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision” (v.21) reminds us of the significance of circumcision as a fundamental practice of the Jewish faith.

Genesis 17:9-11, “⁹God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.”

Jeremiah 4:4, “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD
And remove the foreskins of your heart,
Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
Or else My wrath will go forth like fire
And burn with none to quench it,
Because of the evil of your deeds.”

But if circumcision was a sign of entering into God’s covenant and symbolized spiritual cleansing from sin, then why did Jesus need to be circumcised if He was already God and was entirely sinless?

There were the obvious health benefits. Also, it marked His national identity. It is not clear how much His parents understood regarding Jesus. That is, I do not think it reasonable to expect them to have understood all the theological implications of working of God in salvation. They probably had Him circumcised because that is what Jewish parents did to their male children. God worked in this, though, because Christ could not have ministered as a rabbi without having been circumcised. He would have been an outcast.

“His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb” (v.21). The name “Jesus” is the Greek equivalent of “Joshua” and means “Yahweh saves.” God is a loving God, Who has always saved His people. He did so throughout the Old Testament, and perhaps the most well known verse in Scripture is John 3:16. 1 John 4:10, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Purification and Presentation

“And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed” (v.22) is described in Leviticus 12:2-4, “²When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. ³On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴Then she shall remain in the blood of her purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed.”

There is nothing in the Law that required the presentation to be done at Jerusalem, but since they were nearby, it must have been a great honor to present Jesus at the temple itself. They were following the commands of Exodus 13:2, “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me.”

Since Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, and not Levi, He was not being consecrated for the priesthood. This meant that He also had to be redeemed according to Numbers 18:15-16, “¹⁵Every first issue of the womb of all flesh, whether man or animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. ¹⁶As to their redemption price, from a month old you shall redeem them, by your valuation, five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs.”

Five shekels (each shekel was about one-half ounce so at the current rate of \$14-\$15 per ounce this was less than \$40). was not excessive, but remember that Joseph and Mary had been away from home for several weeks and probably had to pay the costs of lodging and meals as well. They were not wealthy as is indicated by their sacrifice.

Leviticus 12:6-8, “⁶When the days of her purification are completed, for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting a one year old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. ⁷Then he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her, and she shall be cleansed from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, whether a male or a female. ⁸But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean.”

That Mary made the latter offering (v.24) indicates the economic status of the family. It also is evidence that the wise men had not yet visited.

We ought to be reminded here that Jesus grew up in a poor man’s family, eating poor man’s food, wearing poor man’s clothes, and doing poor man’s labor. Yet, even the poor make their offerings.

Also, there is great importance of rituals of the faith. They ought not to supercede our faith, but there is great value in the disciplines of a Godly life. Baptism and communion of course, but also church attendance, prayer, fasting, using our spiritual gifts, and giving among others are not to be ignored or forgotten.

Simeon

Simeon was “righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel” (v.25). Devout means “cautious,” in the sense of fearing the Lord. Simeon was careful to do what was right in the eyes of God. And he longed to see the Messiah. The Messiah would bring comfort and consolation. Let us never forget that there is always a remnant. Lot was in Sodom, Daniel was in Babylon, Obadiah was at the court of Ahab. God reminded Elijah that he was not alone. Even in the dark times of Roman occupation, when God had been silent for four hundred years, there were still those who were faithful. Zacharias and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and now Simeon and Anna. We should never despair.

That “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit” (v.26) reminds us that the Holy Spirit was not conceived at Pentecost. He was active at Creation “and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Throughout Israel’s history the Holy Spirit convicted people of their sin and drew them to God. The Holy Spirit was promised to John the Baptist (Luke 1:15) and had anointed both Zacharias (Luke 1:67) and Elizabeth (Luke 1:41). The Holy Spirit was *with* believers, but did not *indwell* them until after Pentecost.

“He would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (v.26). Simeon must have lived in constant anticipation. It must have motivated him immeasurably. Though we have no idea of when Christ will return, the lesson of living in the immanent anticipation of seeing “the Lord’s Christ” (v.26) should be taken to heart.

Simeon was in the temple complex when “the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law” (v.27). We do not know how Simeon recognized them, or what made this particular child unique. Perhaps the story of Mary’s delivery and the shepherds had reached Jerusalem. Still, it had been several weeks (40 days) and Jerusalem was a large city. Nevertheless, this offers a clear reminder that those looking for the Messiah will find Him.

Simeon’s prophecy is surprising in the context of time and place. Here is a devoted Jew, in the Temple, stating:

³⁰For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
³¹Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³²A Light of revelation to the Gentiles
And the glory of Your people Israel.”

No wonder “His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him” (v.33). This Messiah was for Gentiles as well as the people of Israel. Under this New Covenant “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” Galatians 3:28.

But mixed with this blessing was a warning. “³⁴Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed - ³⁵and a sword will pierce even your own soul - to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (v.34-35). Christ, Himself, said He came to bring division (Luke 12:51).

It had been thus prophesied,

Isaiah 8:14, “Then He shall become a sanctuary;

But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”

As the birth of Christ divides time, so there is no more divisive issue today. All must be either for or against Him. All must either declare Him Lord, or refuse. There is no third road. There is no middle ground. Jesus is not a philosopher or moral teacher. He is a sovereign God and must be acknowledged as such.

Notice that Simeon spoke to Mary, not to Joseph or to the family in general. Perhaps this indicates that Mary, alone, would experience the prophecy's fulfillment. Joseph is not mentioned after the family goes to Passover when Jesus is twelve, and when Mary is mentioned in Scripture after that, she is without Joseph. Jesus' father is not mentioned among his other family members in Matthew 13:55-56, “⁵⁵Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?”

It was Mary who would suffer first the realities of her Son's ministry, Matthew 12:48-50, “⁴⁸But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” ⁴⁹And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” And then she would suffer the even harsher realities of the cross.

Anna

That she was a “prophetess” (v.36) did not mean that she foretold the future, but rather that she spoke for God. While most who did this were men, Acts 21:9 states that the four daughters of Philip were prophetesses.

Luke does not record her words, but he tells us she was “never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers” (v.37), as if he was more concerned with her character as a witness than her testimony. She “came up and began giving thanks to God” and then “continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (v.38).

Simeon and Anna were both used by God to affirm the truth that this was the Messiah. Like Gabriel who announced the coming birth to Mary, the affirming words of Elizabeth, and the shepherds account of the angelic host, all of this was testimony that the Messiah had come.

Chronology of the presentation in Luke

Mary and Joseph are in Jerusalem, then they go to Nazareth (v.39).

If the magi had already visited them, they would have had the financial means to offer a better sacrifice.

If the magi had visited them they would have been warned of Herod's intentions and would not have gone into Jerusalem.

Most likely chronology: Returned to Bethlehem after the presentation, were visited by the magi, used the gifts to finance their trip to Egypt, then return to Nazareth.

Take Aways

Let us not neglect the disciplines of the faith. That we live in an age of grace ought not to be an excuse.

How are we as witnesses that the Messiah has come. Surely we, too, can affirm in a spiritual sense that "we have seen Your salvation."