Christmas study – IV (2023)

**FOR MY EYES HAVE SEEN YOUR SALVATION**

Luke 2:21-38

Key Verse: 2:28-30

“Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.”

As we bid farewell to the closing chapters of 2023 and welcome the approaching New Year, it’s worthwhile to reflect on the significant events that marked the past year, filled with highs and lows. The challenges of 2023, from the lingering effects of COVID-19 to the unsettling conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, coupled with various natural disasters like floods, droughts, and earthquakes, have undoubtedly tested our resilience.

As we stand on the brink of 2024, we acknowledge the unpredictable nature of the times ahead. However, amidst the uncertainties, let us draw inspiration from the timeless story of Simeon and Anna in Jerusalem. These elderly, devout, and loving individuals who cradled the child Jesus and foresaw his future offer profound insights. Their words invite us to approach the unknown with hope and unwavering confidence in God’s providence. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! May the lessons of the past guide us, and may the coming year be filled with renewed hope and steadfast faith.

Look at verses 21-24. “When the time came for the purification rite required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’” According to Jewish customs, Jesus was circumcised and named on the eighth day after his birth. Joseph and Mary traveled to Jerusalem for the purification rites, presenting him to God. Joseph and Mary's offering for their firstborn child, *“a pair of doves or two young pigeons,”* indicates that Jesus, the Son of God, was born into a modest, low-income family. Yet, Luke portrays Joseph and Mary as devout followers of the Law of Moses, highlighting that Jesus grew up under the godly upbringing of Joseph and Mary (Pic#1).

In verses 25-38, we encounter the story of Simeon and Anna, who, during the presentation of infant Jesus at the temple, recognized him as the fulfillment of God’s promise and the awaited Messiah. Let’s delve into who they were and what they conveyed about the child.

Look at verses 25 and 26. “Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It has been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Examining these verses, we learn about a man named Simeon in Jerusalem. Described as righteous and devout, he ardently waited for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Through divine revelation, Simeon knew he wouldn’t pass away before witnessing the arrival of the Lord’s Messiah.

While Simeon’s background remains somewhat elusive – he wasn’t a priest or a recognized prophet like Zechariah or Anna – he appears to be an ordinary senior citizen in the twilight of life. The challenges associated with aging, such as limited cognitive abilities and declining health, might have affected him. Despite these potential obstacles, Simeon retained a hopeful outlook for the future of God’s people.

Luke emphasized Simeon’s spiritual virtues, highlighting his righteousness and devout nature as he eagerly anticipated the consolation of Israel. Although not explicitly identified as a prophet or a religious authority, Simeon’s commitment to God’s law and his hopeful anticipation reflected a deep faith in God’s promise to bring comfort and salvation to the troubled and despairing people of Israel.

Luke’s portrayal of Simeon goes beyond merely highlighting his religious devotion; it underscores Simeon's profound spiritual quality – living in harmony with the Spirit of God. This is evident in expressions like “*the Holy Spirit was on him”* (25), *“It has been revealed by the Holy Spirit”* (26), and *“Moved by the Spirit.”* (27). These phrases collectively paint a picture of Simeon as more than just devout; he was someone deeply connected to the Spirit of God in every aspect of his life. This profound connection serves as a significant and undeniable statement.

However, the question arises: How did Simeon achieve and maintain such a close fellowship with the Spirit of God? It’s essential to recognize that this intimate connection wasn’t automatic for Simeon; it required intentional effort.

As Christians, we receive the Holy Spirit upon accepting Christ. However, living in harmony with the Spirit involves actively developing and maintaining a relationship, as emphasized by Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:16, “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” This underscores the idea that cultivating a deep connection with the Spirit is an ongoing and intentional aspect of our Christian journey.

It’s crucial to recognize that rather than living in harmony with the Spirit of God, we have the potential to grieve or quench the Spirit. Ephesians 4:30-31 cautions, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” These verses specifically outline behaviors that can cause grief to the Spirit. What actions lead to the grieving of God’s Spirit? (Pic#2)

1) **Bitterness**: Holding onto resentful feelings.

2) **Rage:** Intense, vengeful anger.

3) **Anger:** General feelings of anger.

4) **Brawling:** Loud, heated disputes or quarrels.

**5) Slander**: Speaking falsely or maliciously about others.

**6) Malice:** The intention to do harm or evil.

In addition to these, other behaviors can grieve the Holy Spirit, including “*Sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, idolatry, addictive behaviors, jealousy, envy, selfish ambition, rebellion, and divisions.”* (Gal 5:19-20). It’s essential for us to be mindful of and eliminate these negative emotions and destructive behaviors. Even as Christians, it’s easy to become spiritually complacent and remain emotionally immature and unhealthy.

To walk in step with the Spirit, we must practice repentance – an essential Christian discipline emphasized by Jesus and Paul, involving denying ourselves, crucifying the flesh, and keeping in step with the Spirit. (Mark 8:34b) The Apostle Paul stressed, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking, and envying each other.” (Gal. 5:24-26)

It's remarkable to notice that Simeon, living in the Old Testament era, was a spiritual man who lived in harmony with God’s Spirit. It wasn’t automatic; he devoted himself to God’s words and intentionally developed an emotionally healthy spiritual life.

Simeon’s remarkable aspect lies in the unique revelation by the Holy Spirit that he would not pass away before seeing the Lord’s Messiah. (28) This revelation was extraordinary, yet Simeon did not boast about his special connection with God. Instead, he likely kept it to himself, eagerly watching and patiently waiting for the Spirit’s signal. The duration of his wait remains uncertain – was it ten, twenty, thirty, or fifty years? Regardless, he steadfastly resisted doubt, maintaining a prayerful and patient vigil. Finally, the awaited moment had arrived.

In verse 27, we see that “Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required.” (27) Simeon, prompted by the Spirit, likely heard a divine call guiding him to the temple with the assurance, “*Simeon, go into the temple, and you will see the Messiah.”*

Continuing to verse 28. “Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:” (Pic#3) Holding the infant Jesus, Simeon marveled at the realization that he cradled the long-awaited Messiah, the one destined to bring redemption for Israel and all people. Read verses 29-32. “‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.’” After enduring years of anticipation, Simeon declared with immense relief and peace, “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.”

Simeoni’s perspective on salvation differed significantly from that of his contemporaries. During his time, most Jews anticipated a political and national Messiah who would bring them prosperity and independence from Roman rule. However, Simeon’s vision of God’s salvation extended beyond the borders of Israel to encompass all people.

Let’s examine verse 32 again. “A light for the revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” We see God’s redemption likened to “a light” illuminating the darkness. The metaphor of light is profound, reflecting not only the biological and scientific aspects crucial for sustaining life but also the spiritual significance Simeon intended.

In describing God’s redemption as a light, Simeon referred to the light that brings eternal life to those in Christ Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus proclaimed, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (Jn. 8:12) Zechariah, in the previous passage, similarly praised God, anticipating the rising sun from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, guiding their feet into the path of peace. (Lk. 1:78-79)

In the complex landscape of today’s world, widespread political, economic, environmental, and scientific challenges, it may seem impossible to find perfect solutions. Yet, at the core of our existence, the fundamental issue remains the need for the light that gives life – the fullness of life now and forever.

Where can we find such a life? Money, technology, pleasures? No, we need God the Eternal, living within us now and forever. Simeon’s joyous praise of God stemmed from embracing the child Jesus, the Lord’s Messiah, recognizing the source of eternal life within him.

In verses 33-35, while Joseph and Mary marveled at the remarkable statements about the child Jesus, Simeon extended his blessing to Mary and Joseph. However, he also forewarned Mary about the future pain she would endure as the mother of Jesus. Simultaneously, he prophesied that Jesus would become a sign, causing the rise and fall of many in Israel.

Turning to verses 36-38, we counter Anna, a prophetess. Look at verses 36-38. “There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she thanked God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” Despite her advanced age and the seven years of marriage she experienced before becoming a widow, Anna devoted herself to a life of constant worship, fasting, and prayer within the temple. This passage highlights Anna’s exceptional dedication and continual prayer life, serving as a model for the commitment required in our spiritual journey.

Let me close the sermon. Simeon and Anna lived in a time marked by turmoil and unpredictability, akin to the uncertainty of today. Despite the challenges, these two elderly individuals stood firm in their faith. Their unwavering trust in God’s promise of salvation enabled them to navigate the uncertainty of the future. Committed to serving others, they prayed and shared God’s words in the temple, becoming unsung heroes and heroines of faith, shining brightly in their generation like stars in the sky.

We thank God our Father for his steadfast presence and faithfulness in the past year. We step into the new year acknowledging the uncertainties ahead. So, what should we do? Regardless of what lies ahead, we shouldn’t worry because of the steadfast presence of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This calls to remember the words of Apostle Paul, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:6)

As years pass, I’ve noticed a natural tendency to slip into autopilot mode, fostering spiritual complacency. I often don’t realize that I have become rigid and stubborn. In the upcoming year, I resolve to be more deliberate about aligning my life with the Spirit of God. This involves a heightened awareness of my emotions, thoughts, words, and behaviors, ensuring they harmonize with the guidance of God's Spirit.

As I announced my retirement from the pastor position at NYUBF, I took a moment to reflect on the extraordinary grace of God that has been evident over the past 30 years. Gratitude fills my heart for the cherished friends and coworkers who have supported me with love and prayers throughout this journey. While there is a bit of sadness in stepping down, there is also a profound sense of relief, knowing Pastor John Seo will take over. I trust that God, who initiated his good works among us, will continue to flourish in the years ahead.

As we reflected on the inspiring story of Simeon and Anna, who stood unwavering in faith and the tumultuous times of their era, we found echoes of their resilience and dedication resonating with the challenges of our present day. These unsung heroes and heroines of faith, shining like stars amidst uncertainty, teach us a profound lesson about trust in God’s promises.

Apostle Paul’s words echo in our hearts, urging us to be confident in the ongoing work of God: “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:6)

As we stand on the threshold of the coming year, I encourage all of us to commit to a deliberate and intentional alignment of our lives with the Spirit of God. With heightened awareness, we will navigate our emotions, thoughts, words, and behaviors in harmony with the guidance of the Spirit of God. May the stories of Simeon and Anna inspire us to embrace the uncertainties with unwavering trust, and may our journey into the new year be guided by the enduring light of faith. I wish you all “A Happy New Year!”