

“My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation”

December 31, 2017

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Do you know what a “bucket list” is? A “bucket list” is a list of things to do before you kick the bucket. According to one website, here are the top ten bucket list ideas:

1. See the Northern Lights.
2. Skydive.
3. Get a tattoo.
4. Swim with dolphins.
5. Go on a cruise.
6. Get married.
7. Run a marathon.
8. Go zip-lining.
9. Go scuba diving.
10. Ride an elephant.¹

I looked at a few similar lists and there’s a lot of overlap on these lists. Most of top bucket list items involve travel, seeing something unique, and achieving something significant. So, other bucket list items might involve traveling to all fifty states or all seven continents, seeing the Great Wall of China, and writing a book.

What’s on your bucket list? What do you want to see or do before you die?

Today, we’ll look at how two older Jewish people reacted to the baby Jesus. It seems they both had a very short bucket list, a list that had only one item: See the Messiah. They wanted to see God’s anointed one, the one who would redeem God’s people, who would bring the promised “consolation of Israel.”

This morning, we’ll be reading Luke 2:22–40. Before we start reading, I’ll briefly remind us of what we’ve seen so far in Luke’s Gospel. Luke begins by explaining how this book is a work of history. He wrote of the amazing things that God had done through Jesus, and his history was written on the basis of eyewitness testimony. The first chapter of Luke showed us how the angel Gabriel promised that two special children would be born. First, John the Baptist would come. He would urge Israelites to turn back to God and he would prepare the way for the second child. The second child is Jesus, who was conceived in a virgin’s womb by the power of the

¹ <https://www.bucketlist.net/ideas/#top10>.

Holy Spirit. He was the anointed one, the one who would inherit the throne of David, the one who would rule forever, the “Son of the Most High.”

The second chapter of Luke begins with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem because the Roman emperor, Augustus, had decreed that a census should be taken. The census required that Jews travel to their ancestral homeland. Joseph was from the tribe of Judah and the line of David, who was from Bethlehem. So, Joseph and Mary traveled to the “city of David.” Jesus was born there amid animals, in a very humble and perhaps quite filthy environment. This is not the way you would expect such a special child to be born, but it shows that God comes to us in our filth.

After Jesus is born, angels appear to some shepherds and tell them the good news that the Savior, the Lord, the Christ is born. They announce that there is peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased. The shepherds race to discover that indeed the Christ is born. They glorified and praised God for all that they had seen.

In today’s passage, we find out what happens when Joseph and Mary bring their child to the temple in Jerusalem. They bring Jesus there to fulfill the law that God gave to Israel. When they do, two older Israelites are overjoyed.

Let’s first read verses 22–24:

²² And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”²

Why do Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the temple? They brought him there to fulfill two things written in the law of the Old Testament. One is the purification that must occur after a woman gives birth. The book of Leviticus says that after a woman gives birth to a male child, she is unclean for seven days. Then, the child should be circumcised on the eighth day, which is when Jesus was circumcised (Luke 2:21). Then, for the next thirty-three days, the woman shall not touch anything holy or enter the temple. At the end of this time of purification, she shall bring a sacrifice: a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. If she

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

couldn't afford a lamb, she should offer two pigeons or two turtledoves (Lev. 12:1–8). The law says, “And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean” (Lev. 12:8).

To our ears, all of that sounds very strange. Why would a woman be ceremonially unclean after childbirth? Isn't giving birth a good thing? Well, we can't understand this idea without having some concept of the holiness of God. According to the Bible, God is holy. That means he is transcendent and pure. The presence of sin in the world taints us, however, and makes us unholy. If there were no sin in the world, there would be no blood shed. In fact, one of the consequences of sin is that childbirth would become painful (Gen. 3:16). If sin, which is a rebellion against God, never existed, life would be different. According to the law that God gave Israel, Israelites could offer sacrifices to atone for sin. In the book of Leviticus, other things that might not seem inherently sinful, like mold and mildew, could render something unholy. The idea is that the negative things in the world are the result of sin, and the holiness code of Leviticus taught the Israelites that if they were to approach God, they needed to become pure.

The second part of the law that Joseph and Mary fulfilled concerned the firstborn child. The firstborn Israelites belonged to the Lord. They were God's and they needed to be bought back, or redeemed. This idea goes back to the exodus, when God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. To free the Israelites, God sent ten plagues on Egypt. The tenth plague was the death of all the firstborn in the land of Egypt. The only way that anyone could avoid this fate was to sacrifice a lamb and place the blood of the lamb on the door frame and lintel. Since God allowed the firstborn Israelites to be spared, they belonged to him (Exod. 13:2, 12–15). Later, the law required a redemption price of five shekels, which was equivalent to about six months of wages (Num. 18:16).³

I don't want to get bogged down in the details of these Old Testament laws. The point is that Joseph and Mary were obedient to God. They followed his law. The fact that they sacrificed two birds shows that they were not wealthy. When the present Jesus to the Lord, there's no mention of their paying a redemption price. Perhaps they simply offered Jesus to God without paying the redemption price. The idea would be that Jesus is God's, dedicated to his service. They might have been saying, “He is yours, not ours.”⁴

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 161.

⁴ Compare this dedication to 1 Samuel 1:22–28, when Hannah dedicated her son Samuel to the Lord's service.

Beyond these details, it's interesting that Luke mentions Jerusalem, the temple, and the law. We already saw one scene at the temple, when Zechariah offered incense in the temple and the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Throughout both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the temple will play an important role. Of course, the temple was the center of Judaism. It was where God was worshiped, where God's special presence dwelled, and where various sacrifices were offered. But Jesus came to replace the temple. He is the true temple, the dwelling place of God. He is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). He is the true sacrifice; in fact, he is the true High Priest. He's also the "place" of worship for Christians. We don't have to go to a particular building or city to worship God. We can meet God if we are united to Jesus.

Luke also emphasizes the law. Five times in this passage we're told that Joseph and Mary did things according to the law (Luke 2:22, 23, 24, 26, 39). We saw last week that the law of Caesar Augustus brought them from Nazareth to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7). But it is the law of the Lord that brings them to Jerusalem, and there is no doubt that the law of the Lord is greater than the law of any human ruler.⁵

The fact that Joseph and Mary observed God's law shows that they were faithful Israelites. But it also has a greater theological significance. According to the apostle Paul, "[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). Jesus came to obey the law perfectly, which is something that no other Israelite did, something that no other human could do or did do. And he came to do away with the law. That doesn't mean that he came to put an end to morality, or moral principles. But the particular set of laws that God gave to Israel wasn't intended to be permanent. It revealed their sin, it taught them important principles, and it prepared them for the coming of the Messiah.

The law is superseded by the Holy Spirit. It's no surprise that Luke would emphasize the law and the Holy Spirit in the same passage. The age of the law was passing away, and the age of

⁵ "Caesar's authority brings the family to Bethlehem (2:4); the law's authority brings them to Jerusalem, the first time the city is mentioned in the narrative. Following the pattern of step parallelism, Luke conveys his conviction that God's law is higher than the law of the emperor." David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 131. "Step parallelism" means that two events run parallel to each other, but the second event is greater. In chapter 1, the parallels between John and Jesus show that while both are special, promised children, Jesus is greater. Here, the parallels show that God's law is greater than Caesar's.

the Holy Spirit was arriving. We see this in the next several verses. Let's read about a man named Simeon. I'll read verses 25–32:

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation
³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

I want to explore three things in this passage. One concerns who Simeon is. We're told he was “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.” We're also told the Holy Spirit was on him, the Holy Spirit told him he wouldn't die before seeing the Messiah, and that the Holy Spirit led him to the temple to see Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the triune God, and he is very active in Luke's Gospel and in Acts. We're not told how old Simeon is, but we get the sense that he was advanced in years. It seems like he had been waiting for years.

The second thing I want to point out what Simeon was waiting for. He was waiting to see the “consolation of Israel.” The Greek word translated as “consolation” is παράκλησις (*paraklēsis*). It's sometimes translated as “comfort,” and that reminds us of passages in the Old Testament that promised God would bring comfort to Israel. The most famous is Isaiah 40:1: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Another passage is Isaiah 49:13:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the LORD has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted.

That Greek word is also related to the word παράκλητος (*paraklētos*), which Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit. The word is often translated as “Helper” or “Comforter” (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). God will bring comfort and consolation to Israel by means of the Holy Spirit.

And Simeon knew that the day of consolation had arrived. The Messiah, anointed by God's Holy Spirit, had come to redeem his people.

The third thing I want to point out is what Simeon said. When Simeon sees Jesus, he takes the baby in his arms, and he sings the fourth hymn that we find in the first two chapters of Luke. It is known as *Nunc Dimittis*, which is a Latin translation of the first two Greek words, "now dismiss." Simeon tells God that he can now depart in peace, for he has seen the salvation of God. He knows that Jesus is the Savior, the one who will bring peace between God and his people. And this salvation is not just for ethnic Israel only. It is for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. The idea of a "light to the nations," or a "light to the Gentiles," also comes from the book of Isaiah (42:6; 49:6; 60:3). It had always been God's plan to save Gentiles through his Messiah.

Before we move on, we should wonder that an old man would have spent so much time waiting to see a baby. We should wonder that this man, after seeing this baby, said that he could now "depart," which might be a euphemism for death. He is saying to God, "I can now die. I have seen what I wanted to see." Some people want to see other countries or famous landmarks before they die. I bet there were some people in Red Sox Nation who said, before 2004, "God, just let me live long enough to see the Sox win the World Series." They hadn't won it all in a lifetime (from 1918 to 2004). But World Series don't matter that much in the grand scheme of things. And as great as it is to travel, to see unique sites, traveling doesn't take care of our biggest needs. Traveling can't promise eternal life. Various achievements, like running a marathon or writing a book, can't make us right with God or give our souls rest.

But what Simeon saw was indeed the greatest thing anyone could see. He saw God in the flesh. Jesus is not just the Messiah, but he is the Son of God. That means he is divine. He is and has always been God the Son. And when he was conceived, he added a second nature. He was and is truly God, but he also became—and still is!—truly human. He came to fulfill the law for us and he came to pay the penalty for our sin for us. He came as the true sacrifice for sin. Simeon saw this, and he knew that his life was complete.

This is the hope of Israel. It is what faithful Israelites waited centuries to see. And it is the hope of all the nations. Simeon's words echo another passage in Isaiah. This is what Isaiah 52:7–10 says:

⁷ How beautiful upon the mountains

- are the feet of him who brings good news,
 who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
 who publishes *salvation*,
 who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
- 8 The voice of your *watchmen*—they lift up their voice;
 together *they sing* for joy;
 for eye to eye *they see*
 the return of the LORD to Zion.
- 9 Break forth together into singing,
 you waste places of Jerusalem,
 for the LORD has *comforted* his people;
 he has *redeemed* Jerusalem.
- 10 The LORD has bared his holy arm
 before the eyes of *all the nations*,
 and all the ends of the earth shall see
 the *salvation* of our God.⁶

Simeon serves as a watchman, waiting for the salvation of Israel to come. And he sings of the good news that God has brought salvation to his people. He saw that the Lord had come to Zion, Jerusalem, to save. He knew that salvation would extend to people of all nations. He rejoiced and was glad.

Simeon’s words caused Joseph and Mary to marvel. But he wasn’t done. Let’s read verses 33–35:

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

So far in Luke, the news of Jesus’ coming has been all joy. But now there’s an ominous tone. Simeon says that the child has been appointed for the fall and rising of man, that he will be opposed, that a sword will pierce Mary’s soul, and that the secret thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. Simeon says that Jesus will be a polarizing figure. Some people will receive him and others will oppose him. In the book of Isaiah, it says that God “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). And yet God says, also in Isaiah,

⁶ I have italicized some of the key words that connect that passage to this one.

Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion,
a stone, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation:
'Whoever believes will not be in haste' (Isa. 28:16).

In the New Testament, this language is applied to Jesus (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:6–8; cf. Luke 20:17). The idea is that for some, Jesus is a stumbling stone. He is offensive. People trip over him and fall. But others will build their lives on Jesus. He will be their rock. And he is the cornerstone of the church.

Jesus himself said that he came not to bring peace, but to bring a sword (Matt. 10:34). That does not mean that Jesus was violent. What Jesus meant was that he will divide people. Some will trust him and others won't. It was true two thousand years ago and it remains true today. Jesus knew that. Simeon knew that. But I doubt that Mary and Joseph knew that when Jesus was just a baby.

Jesus is divisive because he reveals our true condition. He said he is the light of the world (John 8:12). Light is a good thing. The light of the sun provides warmth. Without that light, there would be no photosynthesis. Without photosynthesis, there would be no plant life. Without plant life, there would be no animal life. We wouldn't be here. But light also reveals the truth, and a lot of people don't want the truth about the spiritual conditions revealed. Jesus said,

¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God (John 3:19–21).

Jesus reveals that we're sinners. He told his own brothers, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil" (John 7:7). That's a verse that most churches won't read. But Jesus said it, and he did tell us we're sinners who need to turn from our sin and turn to God.

Simeon also told Mary that this child would cause "a sword [to] pierce through your own soul also." I can't imagine how Mary took this news. I wonder what she thought. How would her soul be pierced by a sword? What does that mean? It probably refers to the pain she would experience as Jesus' mother. Sometime after this event, Joseph and Mary would take Jesus to Egypt to hide from King Herod. Luke doesn't tell us about this, but Matthew does (Matt. 2).

Herod the Great heard that the “King of Israel” had been born in Bethlehem. That was a threat to his own rule. So, he had the male infants in Bethlehem killed. An angel warned Joseph about this and he took his family to Egypt. Next week, we’ll see an event that caused Mary great distress (Luke 2:41–52). But the greatest distress must have been caused by Jesus’ death. Mary was there at the cross when Jesus was crucified. He was treated like the worst of criminals, an enemy of the state. And Mary had to witness her own son’s execution (John 19:25).

Jesus brings joy and comfort. But he also brings pain. In the end, that pain leads to greater joy for those who are united to Jesus. I’ll say more about that later.

But before I do that, let’s meet the other Jewish person who waited for the consolation of Israel. Let’s read verses 36–38:

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

At the same time, there was an old woman named Anna who was a prophetess. We’re told that she had been married for seven years and then lived as a widow. The ESV says she was married until she was eighty-four, but the original Greek could be translated “and then as a widow for eighty-four years.” If she had married quite young, perhaps at age thirteen (not unheard of for Jewish woman of that era), she would be over one hundred at this time. Either way, she lived as a widow for a long time. She spent every waking hour at the temple complex, waiting for the redemption of Israel. We’re not told her actual words, but we are told that she was a prophetess, and that when she saw Jesus at the temple, she gave thanks to God and told everyone else who was waiting for the redemption of Israel. God has come in the flesh as a baby, a baby would grow up to be Israel’s Savior and King.

After offering sacrifices and dedicating Jesus to the Lord, we’re told that Joseph and Mary moved back to Nazareth in Galilee. Luke is probably compressing the events. It’s likely that after this, they returned to Bethlehem for some time, then went to Egypt in exile, and only later moved to Nazareth. At any rate, let’s finish today’s passage by reading verses 39 and 40:

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

We'll talk more next week about how Jesus grew, became strong, and was filled with wisdom. But for now, I want us to think about a couple of things. One, let me return to that idea of a bucket list. What is on your bucket list? What do you want to see before you die? Could that something ever compare to seeing God in the flesh? Could that something ever compare to seeing God come to rescue his people? Jesus came to save his people. When he first came as a baby, he didn't come to fix every problem in the world. But he came to fulfill God's righteous demands, to obey God's law where we have so often failed. And Jesus came to die to pay for the sins of all who will ever trust in him. Our bucket list items are so pathetic and trivial when compared to Jesus.

For those of us who know Jesus, let me ask this: What do you want to see God do before you die? Is there something you are waiting for God to do? Is there a way that you can work to make that a reality in your life?

Another way of asking this is to ask, why are you still alive? What does God want for you to do? God doesn't just want us to live pleasant lives of comfort, to retire from work and just wait around. God has planned in advance good works for us to do (Eph. 2:10). Sometimes, we need to wait on God to do the impossible. But many times, we need to act. We should be faithful to do the things that God wants us to do, the things that are clearly stated in Scripture. Make those your bucket list items.

Those who are faithful wait on the Lord. And those who are faithful act on God's word. Simeon and Anna were faithful. They waited. But they also acted. When the Spirit led Simeon, he went. Anna had been waiting at the temple. We might say she was actively waiting. And Simeon and Anna were blessed. The many decades of their lives had been a prelude to meeting Jesus. They were rewarded for their patience and their faithfulness.

Often in the Bible, we read of older people whose greatest moments came later in life. That was true for Abraham and Moses. It was certainly true for Simeon and Anna. You may be retired and in the last years of this life. But that doesn't mean you're finished doing God's work. You may yet see God do amazing things in your life. We tend to think of our lives as winding down at the end. What if your six, seven, or eight decades of life have all been leading to something that is still ahead? What if the best is yet to come?

In fact, the best is yet to come. Even the old and the frail have hope that the best years aren't behind, but ahead. Simeon and Anna saw Jesus in their latter years. Those who have put

their trust in Christ will see their Redeemer. In their flesh, they will see God. But they won't meet him as frail, weak, mortal beings. No, when Christians meet Jesus, they will see him with perfect eyes in glorious, immortal, resurrected bodies. They will live in a perfect world with him forever.

But for those of us who don't know Jesus, or who perhaps are not quite committed to Jesus, I want to say something. Earlier, I said that Jesus is a polarizing figure. He produces division. People either embrace him or reject him. They will find him to be a stone of offense or a rock upon which they can build their lives. Which side are you on?

Simeon said that Jesus would cause the falling and rising of many. All of us are bound to fall. We will die. That is a fact. And we fall in the sense that we do things that are wrong. We sin against God and each other. The question is whether we will rise. Those who fall at the feet of Jesus in repentance, who confess their sin and ask for mercy will find forgiveness. They will rise. Those who humble themselves before God will be exalted. But those who refuse to do this will simply fall, with no rising. And that falling will continue forever.

Admitting our sin can be painful. Repentance can feel like a sword is piercing our soul. In fact, there are elements of the Christian life that feel painful. God often uses our pain to cause us to grow. He uses painful events in our lives the way a surgeon wields a scalpel. God causes us pain in order to heal us. But that pain is far better than an eternity of misery, of being cut off from God.

And Christianity is the only religion that says that God knows pain. He knows what it's like to be cut off. He knows what it's like to have a sword pierce him, at least metaphorically speaking. When the first human beings sinned against God, they were evicted from Paradise. Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden of Eden. Then God placed cherubim, angelic creatures, to guard the path back to the Garden. And they wielded a flaming sword (Gen. 3:24). The idea is that if someone were to try to get to Paradise, they would be cut down by the sword. We need someone to take the sword for us, to open up the path to Paradise so we can be reconciled to God. And that's what Jesus did on the cross. He took the sword so that we don't have to. He fell, bearing God's righteous, holy wrath against sin so that we don't have to. Yet after he fell, he rose from the grave. His resurrection guarantees that his work on the cross has the power to defeat sin and death. All who follow Jesus can follow him back to Paradise.

Many people oppose Jesus because they don't want to be told they are evil, because they don't want to accept his authority, because they don't want to change. But Jesus is our only hope. He is the only one who can bring us comfort and joy. He fell so you can rise. He was pierced by the sword so that you don't have to experience God's condemnation. I urge you to follow Jesus. Trusting him should be at the top of your bucket list.