



Sunday School Lesson Summary for December 30, 2007
Released on December 26, 2007

“Called to Witness”

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 49:5, 6.
Background Scripture: Luke 2:22–38.
Printed Text: Luke 2:22–35.

Luke 2:22–35

22 And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord;

23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;)

24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

25 And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;

32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

33 And Joseph and his mother marveled at those things which were spoken of him.

34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also;) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Introduction

To Witness

When a crime is committed, the police always look for witnesses. When a disaster hits a community, the reporters for the evening news always want to interview a witness on the site. Many times people on the scene can hardly wait to tell what they know. This is a reminder that the verb *witness* has at least two meanings: “to see something” and “to testify about something.”

People see and testify not only to crimes and disasters, but also to good things. People who are getting married choose good friends to sign the marriage license in witness. They invite family and friends to witness the happy event. Life has many special moments that are good to witness.

In this lesson we will be introduced to a man who witnessed a great event of history. He was told long in advance of the great day; he spent his life waiting for the moment. The event was the arrival of the Messiah at the temple; the eyewitness was a man named Simeon.

Lesson Background

A striking element of Luke's account of Jesus' birth is the mention of the man Simeon. While he bore the noble name of one of the tribes of Israel, absolutely nothing is known about him outside Luke's few verses. Of the various things this text says about Simeon, the most important is that "the Holy Ghost was upon him" (Luke 2:25).

While the presence of the Holy Spirit was not a common experience in the lives of the people of Israel, the Holy Spirit has been directly involved since the beginning (Genesis 1:2). In the Old Testament the Spirit came upon people whom God selected to do special tasks. To such people the Spirit gave skill in craftsmanship (Exodus 31:3), wisdom in leadership (Judges 3:10), or phenomenal physical strength (Judges 14:6). As king of Israel, David pleaded with God, "Take not thy Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:11). Most importantly, the prophets were enabled to speak "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21).

As the Gospel accounts begin, it had been more than 400 years since the last Holy Spirit-inspired Scripture was penned (the book of Malachi). Today we will see that Simeon had received, at some point in his life, Holy Spirit-inspired knowledge of the coming of the Messiah. He had a firsthand privilege of seeing the infant Savior.

Witness by Obeying (Luke 2:22-24)

Our opening verses show several of the ways in which God calls people to be witnesses to their faith. The first is by obedience to His Word. Joseph and Mary demonstrate their respect for God by doing what He says. The purification of the mother and the redemption of the firstborn son are acts of submission to God's law.

1. Why was Jesus taken to the temple early in His life (Luke 2:22-23)?

The events in this lesson occurred during the second month of Jesus' earthly life. Joseph and Mary had had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day in strict adherence to the law (v. 21).

All firstborn males in Israel belonged to the Lord. Israelites were required to recognize this fact in remembrance of their deliverance from Egypt, when the Lord killed the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exod. 13:14-15).

When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem for His presentation (Luke 2:22), it was based on this principle (v. 23). The presentation and redemption were to occur after the child had reached the age of one month (tradition specified at least thirty-one days).

2. Why did Mary have to present herself in the temple (v. 24)?

A mother was considered unclean for forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter (Lev. 12:1-5). During this time, she could not enter the sanctuary or touch holy things. After this time expired, she brought a sacrifice of both a burnt offering and a sin offering. The sin offering was always a turtledove or a young pigeon; the burnt offering was a lamb or, for the poor, a turtledove or a young pigeon (vs. 6-8).

This, then, was the second reason for Joseph and Mary's trip to Jerusalem. A special ceremony would accompany Mary's offerings, and she would be pronounced clean by the priest. The fact that they brought a pair of birds for the two offerings indicates that they were too poor to bring a lamb.

3. What inspiration can we gain from the fact that Joseph and Mary faithfully fulfilled their obligations under the Old Testament law, despite having been shown special, miraculous attention by God?

People who feel that God has shown them special favor sometimes think that it is not that important for them to serve in some basic and ordinary ways in the church. The earthly parents of Jesus seem to have been just as eager to fulfill humbly their responsibilities as they were before. They believed they now had far more reason to praise and honor God because of the ways He had worked in their lives.

The same should be true for us. The more we are blessed, the greater should be our desire to serve God and fulfill our responsibilities to Him.

Witness by Believing (Luke 2:25–29)

4. What kind of person was Simeon? For what was he waiting (v. 25)?

Simeon is the name borne by a man who encounters Jesus' family in the temple. This is a famous name, the name of the second son of Jacob by Leah; it is thus the name of 1 of the 12 tribes of Israel.

According to the way the world looks at people, there is little that is noteworthy about Simeon. In God's sight, however, Simeon has an important role in identifying the infant Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Simeon is just, or righteous. He is devout in the practice of his faith, living according to the standards of God. He was also devout, or reverent and cautious in his walk with God. He was thus God-fearing and spiritually sensitive to the leading of the Lord. He must have been intimately acquainted with the Scriptures.

This man is waiting for the "consolation," or "comforting," of Israel. He is part of the faithful remnant of Israel who still expects that God will comfort His people as Isaiah had promised (see Isaiah 40:1, 2; 49:13). The Holy Ghost, whom Jesus later will call the Comforter (John 14:16), has a special presence in Simeon's life.

5. What did the Holy Ghost reveal to Simeon (v. 26)?

The Holy Ghost has brought consolation into Simeon's life by revealing a wonderful truth: before Simeon dies, he will see *the Lord's Christ*. The Lord God has promised

to send His Christ, His Messiah—His Anointed One. Jesus is the one anointed by God to bring deliverance to humankind. Many thousands of God-fearing Jews have lived and died without seeing the coming of the Messiah. But the Spirit has assured Simeon that he will see this event. How blessed Simeon is!

This should encourage those who await Jesus' return. The Spirit does not give us the assurance that He will come in our lifetime; indeed, it is unwise to speculate on God's timing. Yet we can trust His Word that the long wait will eventually end (Hebrews 9:28).

6. What role did the Holy Spirit have in Simeon's presence in the temple (v. 27)?

The Holy Spirit, having previously assured Simeon that he would see Messiah, led him to the temple the very day Jesus was brought in. The One who made the promise also fulfilled it. Here is another reminder to us that God is active in our lives both to assure us of His promises and to fulfill them as we walk by faith. As Joseph and Mary were about to present the baby, Simeon met them.

7. Simeon received specific communication from the Holy Spirit. How does the Spirit's leading in our own lives compare and contrast with that of Simeon's?

The New Testament shows us many instances of people being guided or led by the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1; Acts 13:2, 4; 15:28; 16:6; 20:23). Figuring out *how* that leading occurred and *if* such leadings are to be expected today are the hard parts! But we must try, since the ongoing walk of a Christian revolves around discerning God's direction for life.

We should frankly admit that sometimes what we think is the Holy Spirit's leading may at times be nothing more than our own desires and whims at work. This is called *subjectivism*. What we think to be the Holy Spirit's leading should always be tested against Scripture. Will the contemplated action make us more like Jesus? Will the action help the church fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19, 20)? Will the result be to create more fruit of the Spirit according to Galatians 5:22, 23? If the result of our action will create divisions with others, will it be the godly or the ungodly kind of division (Matthew 10:34; Luke 14:26; Romans 16:17, 18; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18; Titus 3:10)?

Asking such questions is an important part of distinguishing the Spirit's leading from the impulses of the flesh.

8. What was ironic about Simeon holding Jesus in his arms (vs. 28-30)?

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Simeon took the child in his arms. Let us not miss the fleeting irony of this event. The great Deliverer for whom Simeon had waited now lay helpless in his arms! This demonstrates the extent to which God would go to bring salvation to mankind. His Son took His place among us in true human form (cf. John 1:14; Phil. 2:7).

Cradling the holy child, Simeon "blessed God" (Luke 2:28). The word "blessed" means that he spoke well of Him or that he gave Him praise. He praised God for the fulfillment of His promises to him, to Israel, and to the world.

Simeon first praised God that his service had been successfully completed (v. 29). "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace" is not a prayer for permission to depart. It is a statement. God was now letting His servant depart in peace. The word for "Lord" emphasizes God's absolute authority over him, and the word for "servant" refers to a bondsman totally committed to his master. That is how Simeon saw his relationship to God.

He recognized that his appointed task of watching for the Messiah was now completed and that his Master was releasing him from that service. He could "depart in peace, according to thy word" (v. 29). The Christ child has come during Simeon's lifetime, *according to God's word*. Everything is just as God said it would be.

Witness by Proclaiming (Luke 2:30-35)

As a faithful witness, Simeon is eager to proclaim what he knows. With his own eyes he has seen the Lord's *salvation* (v. 30). He has seen the child through whom deliverance will come. Indeed, his eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord (Isaiah 40:5; 52:10)!

Still, it must be admitted that Simeon has seen only a baby. There is nothing remarkable in the appearance of this infant. There is no golden halo over His head. But Simeon sees the baby Jesus through the eyes of faith. He believes what God has revealed through His Spirit. It is in this sense that Simeon can say he had seen the Lord's salvation.

This is a truth we must never forget. The core of the Christian faith is not a pattern of worship, a code of ethics, or a system of theology. It is *a Person* in whom salvation resides, ready to be dispensed to all who trust Him (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Thus, He must always be the focus of every Christian's faith and message (cf. Acts 8:35; 1 Cor. 1:23-24; Col. 1:27-28).

9. What did Simeon see being offered through Jesus (vs. 31,32)?

Simeon knows that the arrival of Jesus somehow advances God's plan of salvation *before the face of all people*. There is important doctrinal truth here: God's salvation is not just for Israel; it is for everyone. God's love is being extended to the whole world. The universality of the gospel is a strong theme in the Gospel of Luke.

Simeon gets more specific in verse 32. This child will be *a light* that will penetrate the pagan darkness of *the Gentiles*, as Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 promise. This light will also be the shining *glory* of God's chosen people. For Israel, nothing will be more to the nation's glory than giving birth to the Messiah (Isaiah 46:13).

Christ does not come, therefore, to cast aside either Jews or Gentiles or to set them against one another. When this light penetrates the darkness, there will be illumination for all. In Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew (Colossians 3:11).

10. Simeon's delight comes from knowing something about who Jesus is. How did you first react when you realized who Jesus is and what He has done for you?

Allow your students—all who are willing—time to relate their experiences in encountering Jesus (what some call *testimonies*). It is important that we share our joy with others in this regard. Not every believer is called to be a preacher, but we can all share about how we came to know Jesus as Savior.

Taking time to let students answer this question with other believers present may make it easier for them to share later with unbelievers as opportunity arises. Also, we can pray specifically for God to grant us what may be called “divine appointments” when we can share the good news (compare 1 Peter 3:15).

11. How did Joseph and Mary react to Simeon's pronouncement (v. 33)?

Simeon has spoken of the child in such glowing terms that *Joseph* and the baby's *mother* are frankly amazed. While they themselves know special truth about Jesus, they are startled by words spoken by a total stranger. How can he know who this child is? How can he know about the salvation God would bring through Him? But Simeon has even more to say!

12. What sober prophecies did Simeon make about Jesus and Mary (v. 34)?

Simeon now blesses *Mary* and *Joseph* (v. 34), following with a special message for *Mary* personally. The coming of Jesus is set for both bad news and good. It is the determination of God that it shall be so.

The bad news and good news are expressed in terms of *the fall and rising again of many in Israel*. This points to a division within Israel. God has set Christ as the great divide regarding the destiny of every person. While Jesus is the source of salvation for all who obey Him (see Hebrews 5:9), He is also the point of spiritual collapse for those who reject Him. Though He is himself the *sign* and symbol of God's love, He will be *spoken against* by many of those whom He comes to save. Tragically, such opposition is to be especially true of Simeon's own nation (Isaiah 8:14; 1 Corinthians 1:23; 1 Peter 2:8).

Simeon has yet one more thing to say to *Mary* (Luke 2:35). There will be dark moments in her future because of Jesus. The height of her joy at the birth of her son will be matched by the depth of her anguish at the cross. As the nails pierce His hands and feet, and as the spear pierces His side, it will be as if *a sword* were piercing the *soul* of *Mary*. She will stand at the foot of the cross, staying by Jesus as He dies (see John 19:25).

When Jesus goes to the cross to die, He creates a great moral crossroad. When people see His sacrificial death, *the thoughts* of their *hearts* are *revealed* (Matthew 27:38–43). The idea of the cross is still outright foolishness to many (see 1 Corinthians 1:23). It has been wisely said, “Jesus is the touchstone of human hearts.”

CONCLUSION

To Witness Is to See

"I was there! I saw it with my own eyes!" Such are the words of a witness. To see, to hear, to feel firsthand—this is what makes a witness. Often a person will take special pride in the fact that he or she was present when some significant event took place. The greater the event, the more important the witness.

The birth of Jesus had been awaited with great anticipation. After so many centuries of preparation, God fulfilled the prophecies and promises. The miracle of the ages came to people who were faithful members of God's community. God chose them for their special roles; they became witnesses of what He had done.

Luke demonstrated how the shepherds were called to witness the newborn Messiah. Then he added Simeon, who had waited much of his life to see God's anointed one. In the verses that follow today's text, Luke also related how Anna, an aged prophetess, gave thanks when the holy family came into the temple.

Other people witnessed Jesus at age 12; still more witnessed Him in His ministry. Near the end of the first century, the apostle John would look back and recall Christ, "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled" (1 John 1:1).

To Witness Is to Tell

When people are witnesses to a big event, they are nearly always eager to tell someone about it. To witness is not only *to see*; to witness is also *to tell*. Joseph, Mary, Simeon—all in their own way became witnesses to the greatness of God. They believed what God said, obeyed what God commanded, and gladly proclaimed what God had done.

At the end of Jesus' life on earth He told His disciples, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me." The apostles had been eyewitnesses to all He did, so they could testify to what they had seen. Even in the face of persecution they said, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). In the words of the apostle John, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you" (1 John 1:3).

Christians are also called to be witnesses today. While we are not eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus, we have experienced firsthand the power of His Word in our lives. Witnessing is a vital part of faith, and the world desperately needs to know what we know about Jesus.

PRAYER

Our Father, we praise You for making salvation available to all people. Help us to be as eager as Simeon to tell others that we have met Christ. In the name of Him who is our light and our glory we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

No silent witnesses!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Study **Luke 2:41–52** **“Inspired to Inquire”** in anticipation of next week’s lesson.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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