

Are You Listening?

The Christmas Season is closing in. We have do lists, shopping lists, and invitations to parties, as well as church and school Christmas presentations. It seems that when we need the most to slow down to appreciate the season, we are too busy to do so.

In fact, I sometimes feel “out of touch” because my life is racing ahead full speed. I don’t hear the sounds of daily life because my energy and attention is divided between so many things. It seems that Christmas loses its joy when it is about lists and things.

Most of us try to slow down a bit by coming to church and by trying to connect with a spiritual activity on Christmas Eve. But I have found that we can only resist the noise of the season if we have been prepared before the season began!

This morning we are going to look at two people who avoided preoccupation with busy-ness and paid enough attention so that they heard God’s voice in the middle of what would seem to us, a very chaotic time.

The Bible passages on the birth of Christ almost seem too familiar. We have heard them every year. We stop paying attention because it is the same old story. But what if you heard some of it in a brand new way? Let me read to you the passage following the birth of Christ.

Luke 2:21-38 NAS:

[21] On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

[22] When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord [23] (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), [24] 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."

[25] 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 upon him. [26] It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. [27] 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, [28] Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

[29] "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

[30] For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

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Bob Higgins

Page 1

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[33] The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. [34] Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, [35] so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

[36] There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, [37] and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. [38] Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

I. Mary and Joseph

- a. Mary was pregnant before she was married. The bible says that she was pregnant by the Holy Spirit.
- b. We know that Joseph struggled with this issue, but in obedience to God because of a dream he had, he moved ahead by faith and married Mary.
- c. Next the baby is born in a manger.
 - i. Many of us know of the events of the Shepherds and Wise Men that occur between the time of his birth and a few short weeks later.
- d. The event we just read, however, occurs 40 days after his birth.
 - i. Mary and Joseph are staying in Bethlehem for awhile.
 1. This is a suburb about 6 miles from Jerusalem.
 2. After the 40 day period has passed, in obedience to the Law, they go to the Temple to fulfill the law's requirements.
 - ii. *"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law..."* (Galatians 4:4-5).
 - iii. **Background:**
 1. The Law said that when a woman has a child, she became ritually unclean.
 2. On the 40th day after a male child's birth, the mother of the child must go to the temple to receive ritual purification so she could resume temple worship and share in other religious ceremonies. (Leviticus 12).
 3. Also, according to the Book of Exodus, every firstborn male child was considered sacred to God.
 4. Consequently, the parents were to take the child to the Temple and present him to God.
 5. And according to the Law, the parents would redeem the child by offering a sacrifice. (Exodus 13:2).

6. The sacrificial offering was usually a lamb or a bullock for a rich family.
 - a. For a poor family, the offering was either two turtle doves or young pigeons.
 - b. In Mary and Joseph's case, it was two birds, indicating that they were poor.
- iv. Mary and Joseph would have been walking through a throng of people gathered around the outer courts, the courts of the Gentiles where they would have approached the money changers to purchase their two doves.
 1. They would have been one of many families with an infant that would have come that day in order to be redeemed.
 2. After they purchased their doves, they worked their way through the outer court of the temple until they were interrupted by a strange man with a strange message.

II. God Prepares People

- a. Some of this account, I believe, is to show us God's providence in preparing people for the lives they will live for Him.
 - i. God may not cause every event in our lives, but He uses everything.
 - ii. And God does orchestrate many events, using people to prepare you or me for a life that will change the world we live in.
- b. God was working that preparation in Mary and Joseph for the life they would have in parenting the Messiah..
- c. Think about the great responsibility of parenting the Messiah!
 - i. Mary and Joseph did not fully understand what was happening.
 - ii. I believe that they were pretty naïve about all of this.
 - iii. They were 14-16 years old.
 - iv. Mary is pregnant with her first child.
 1. I know that every first time mother is full of anxiety and concerns because she is not familiar with what is happening.
 2. Then once the baby is born, she is overly watchful.
 - a. A cough means a trip to the doctor.
 - b. A fever means the emergency room.
 - c. A fall means an x-ray.
 3. Funny, by the time the second one is born, we don't even notice unless their fever is 103.
 4. But Mary is having her first baby.
 5. And this baby is destined to be the Messiah.
 6. She is very, very protective, you can count on it!
- d. You might remember some of the events leading up to this. The shepherds in the fields...they come and worship him. This has to lead Mary to "wonder!"
 - i. Later, the Wise Men (Maji) will come bearing gifts.

1. We don't know when they arrive, it could be up to 2 years after his birth.
 2. But even so, Mary "wonders" about what she sees and hears.
- e. This day, however, Joseph and Mary are carrying their baby across the temple court along with two birds, getting ready to come to the priest to fulfill the law's requirement.
- f. And they are stopped by a strange man.
- i. This stranger was named Simeon.

III. Lets look at Simeon for a moment.

- a. The bible says he was *who was righteous and devout. And that He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.*
- i. Back in this time, the Holy Spirit was not given to individuals on a permanent basis. The Spirit of God would touch someone and they would "hear God."
 - ii. In Simeon's case, the Holy Spirit was "upon" or "rested" upon him.; This meant that he had a continuous communion with God, not unlike what Christians are supposed to have.
 - iii. Simeon had waited all of his life for the opportunity to see the Messiah.
 1. That's because Simeon was a part of a group of Hebrew men who were called the "quiet of Israel."
 2. They devoted their lives to praying, to meditating, to reading God's Word, and to waiting for the coming of the Messiah.
 3. They constantly looked out for the "Promised One" of Israel. Day after day, month after month, year after year Simeon waited patiently in expectation.
 4. As each male child was brought into the temple Simeon would ask God, "Is this the one?", and the answer was the same, "No."
 - iv. The most important part comes next in verse [26] *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*
 1. We often assume that Simeon was very old when this occurred. We make that assumption because the bible says that [26] *It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*
 - a. But nowhere in the text does it say he was old. Just that he was not going to die before He had seen the Messiah.
 - b. The first half of that verse is often overlooked. It had been "revealed" to him.
- b. [27] *Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts*
- i. Imagine that! At just the right instant, he was "moved by the Spirit of God"
 - ii. Out of the dozens of parents that would pass through the temple courts that day carrying babies, Simeon was led to this one couple.
 1. It just so happened to be the couple carrying the Messiah.
 2. How do you think he knew that?
 3. Do you think it was by some coincidence that he knew?
 4. And, could God have used you in his place?

- a. Do you think that God doesn't use people today to do similar things?
 - b. God hasn't changed!
- iii. What do you think that means, "moved by the Spirit?"
 1. I guarantee it doesn't mean he was a robot. He had a desire to hear.
 - a. He was listening intently for the prompting of God.
 2. The bible says that you and I are called to be "in step with the Spirit."
 - a. That means to be in tune, listening. Hearing. And Obeying.
 3. Simeon could have been hearing God but not responded to His prompts.
 4. If that was the case, Mary and Joseph would have missed the blessing God had for them.
 - a. To be moved by the Spirit means to be attentive to the Voice of God in our circumstances and our inner spirit.
 - b. It means that we so desire God's purposes that we are ready to respond when we hear Him speak to us.
- iv. Has that ever happened to you?
 1. Have you ever "heard" the prompting of God's Spirit and ignored it?
 2. Or have you felt the prodding of the God's Spirit and obeyed and seen something special happen?
- v. Many Christians are threatened by the idea that God speaks to us here and now.
 1. Why is that?
 2. They go along thinking they have God tucked securely into their theology, believing they hold the key to knowing Him in their doctrine, and it unnerves them to hear reports that God is speaking to people they know at work, at church, or right next door.
 3. They are comfortable learning about God's existence and His attributes, but show me a theological seminary anywhere with a class teaching students how to hear God speak.
- vi. It is normal for God to speak to His people!
 1. When you're in trouble; it is normal for you to expect God to send His messengers to help you. He sustains you.
 2. It is normal for God to comfort your heart and speak to you so definitely that you can stand in the middle of trial and tribulation and boldly proclaim what God gives you to say, or do what He empowers you to do.
- vii. There are two essential truths in the Bible that are never explained. They are always assumed.
 1. The first is the eternal existence of God;
 2. the second is the fact that God speaks.
 - a. There is an unbroken chain of communication between God and His people all through the Bible, but it is never discussed or proven, it just is.

- b. Hebrews 1:1-3 *God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things*
 - c.
- viii. Most of us aren't listening though.
 - 1. I say that because if we were listening and obeying intently, our lives would be FULL of miracles and changed lives.
 - 2. But for most of us, it is an occasional experience.
 - 3. We are only half tuned in.
 - 4. Our receivers aren't on or they are tuned into something other than God.
- ix. But if we will learn to listen, pay attention and respond when God prods us, we will be blessings to others, and we will be instruments of God for changed lives.
 - 1. *[28] Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: [29] "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. [30] For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."*
 - 2. *[33] The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. [34] Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, [35] so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*
- x. Did you see the words of blessing that Simeon said?
 - 1. It is remarkable that Simeon sees Jesus' salvation as extending to all people.
 - 2. Simeon's prophecy to Mary has four elements:
 - a. *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel."*
 - i. How people respond to Jesus and his message will determine their destiny.
 - ii. Many of Jesus' contemporaries receive his message and are saved, but the religious community, by and large, can't bring themselves to believe that Jesus can be God's Messiah.
 - 1. It is the same today. There are those who think that they can win God's approval on their own.
 - 2. Or they believe they can access the spiritual world without God.
 - 3. They will fall.

- iii. Jesus becomes "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall" (Isaiah 8:14; 28:16; Luke 20:17-18; Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6-8).
 - iv. But those who place their faith in Jesus, not just as a religious figure, not just for his teachings, but for who he is... God incarnate, their lives are never the same again!
- b. "and to be a sign that will be spoken against."**
- i. Jesus is God's sign to his people, but he is rejected.
 - ii. "Spoken against" is the Greek verb *antilego*, "speak against, contradict someone, oppose, refuse." [18]
 - iii. **Jesus is the most offensive word in human language.**
 - 1. Just this week, I read of a school that will not allow anyone to say "Merry Christmas" lest someone be offended.
 - 2. Another school would not allow Christian symbols, because they had no secular meaning except to point to Jesus, whereas Muslims and Jews could put their symbols because they had secular meanings.
 - 3. Carry on a conversation with a person, use the word God and you will be fine. Say the name of Jesus and you can watch their faces change.
 - 4. It is little wonder that Demons cannot stand before the name of Jesus.
 - 5. Men cannot either. They use His name as a curse. His name is above every name.
- c. "so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."**
- i. "Thoughts" is the Greek verb *dialogismos*, "content of reasoning or conclusion reached through use of reason, thought, opinion, reasoning, design." [19]
 - ii. Here it seems to be used in a negative sense. Those who stumble at Jesus, who reject him and oppose his message, will finally be shown up for what they are.
 - iii. "Revealed" is the Greek verb *apokolupto* (from which we get our English word "apocalypse").
 - 1. It means, "to cause something to be fully known, reveal, disclose, bring to light, make fully known" (appearing here and at Matthew 10:26 with a judicial connotation. [20])
 - 2. Jesus himself is to be the judge, sitting on the judgment seat of the Messiah: "*This will take place on the day when God*

will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ" (Romans 2:16; cf. Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

3. God sees your heart. He knows your thoughts.
4. You can pretend to be a follower of Christ.
5. But God knows if you are or not.
6. He knows what you are made of.
7. The bible says that you and I will have to make an account for ALL of our conduct and actions to the One who knows our hearts.
8. Are you ready to do that?

d. ***"And a sword will pierce your own soul too."***

- i. Though the Holy Spirit, Simeon can see the deep anguish that Mary will feel as her son is rejected by the nation's leaders and ultimately crucified.
- ii. Mary has a dark, sorrowful future ahead for herself as well.
- iii. Being the mother of the Messiah isn't all it was advertised to be.
- iv. Would she wish she could change her mind now?

IV. Ana

- a. Something else happens right after Simeon is finished. Another "stranger" approaches Mary.
 - i. Mary hasn't even had time to digest what Simeon has said.
 - ii. She is still choking on the "sword"
 - iii. The bible says that an elderly 84-year-old woman approaches now.
 1. This woman is a fixture in the Woman's Court of the Temple.
 2. *"There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, 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 worshiped night and day, fasting and praying." (2:36-37)*
 - iv. Can't you see her? An old lady, a widow for many, many years, with nothing to do but to worship. And so she does. She practically lives in the Women's Court of the Temple, day and night. And she is a prophetess, a female prophet.
 - v. *Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." (2:38)*
 - vi. We don't hear the words of her prophecy, but it seems, like Simeon's, to consist of (1) inspired thanksgiving and (2) speaking about the child to other believing people who are present

V. Who knows exactly what Anna expected to see, what Simeon expected to hear, that day, just at the moment when Mary and Joseph arrived with the newborn.

- a. And who knows how busy the Temple courtyard was that morning, with people and animals, priests and peasants crowding in together.

- b. Two poor people from the country, like Mary and Joseph, would not have stood out in such a crowd
- c. Yet, God created a divine appointment between them and two strangers who showered them with blessings and a word from God.
 - i. That word, was a word of encouragement.
 - ii. A word that would tell forth of the future. The hope. The promise.
 - iii. God desires to use you to make a difference in someone's life.
 - 1. To see the promise and the hope in them.
 - 2. He probably has tried over and over to get your attention, to have you see what He sees and to hear with His voice.
 - 3. *One of the challenges in the waiting, it seems to me, is to listen to what God is telling us. Hearing his word, rather than our own. Being driven by his agenda, not the one we might think he ought to have, or which would fit the more easily into our agenda."*
- d. So how did Simeon and Ana hear God so clearly?
 - i. They were devoted to God, to prayer and to His Word.
 - ii. They didn't just go through life living for themselves.
 - iii. They were on the lookout for God.
 - iv. If you asked them, "Are you listening..." they would have said, YES!
- e. My question for you, this Christmas Season, is are you listening to God? Or are you being distracted by the STUFF around you, the shopping lists and the to-do lists?
- f. Won't you come to Christ and put that aside. Let Him be the reason for your season?

a.

1. Train your mind to listen!

- a. Journaling, the writing out of our prayers and God's answers, provides a great new freedom in hearing God's voice.
- b. God told Habakkuk to record the vision and inscribe it on tablets...(Hab. 2:2) I
 - i. If you begin to search Scripture for this idea, you will find hundreds of chapters demonstrating it (Psalms, many of the prophets, Revelation).
- c. God told Habakkuk to write his answer down.
 - i. Maybe that's because he knows how easy it is for people to forget and get stuck in a rut and routine.
 - ii. When we pray about something for so long we can find ourselves getting bored because we keep saying the same things over and over.
 - iii. After a while we give up and forget what we were praying about or at least we feel like it sometimes.
- d. The Lord instructed Habakkuk to write his words down because he didn't want his words to be forgotten from one generation to the next. He wanted his words to be a visual reminder to every person who reads them.
 - i. But it doesn't stop there. Not only does God intend for us to read and record his words, he expects us to run with them and tell others.
 - ii. If you find yourself in a prayer rut try writing down your prayers as you think them.
 - iii. Some of us can express ourselves by recording our thoughts and emotions on paper. Your prayers can take the form of prose or poetry.
 - iv. In Habakkuk's time he would have responded to God's instruction by engraving God's words on plates or plaques of clay, stone or even metal. They would have been on public display to be read by all those who passed by.
- b. I understand that not everyone is into journaling...yet that's how we got our Bible.
 - a. You and I tend listen to God often because we have a need which is at stake.
 - i. You need a spouse, a healing, a direction on purchasing a car, or a home, or whether or not to do or not do something. And believe me, that is good to ask!
 - ii. But God also desires that we learn to listen on a moment by moment basis.
 1. This is called "walking by the Spirit" and is the kind of relationship you and I were designed for.
 - c. We can learn to be attentive to God's gentle movement in the world around us and to respond, and to be used to turn the world right-side-up.