

## Looking Ahead Luke 2:21-40

A promising beginning

The new year – the closing of one chapter, the opening of another chapter in our lives

A chapter that, while also carrying uncertainty, remains full of possibility for the realization of our plans and hopes

In Luke 2:21-40 we also see the closing of one chapter, and the opening of another in the life of God's people

The ending of that period, many centuries, of expectant longing by God's faithful people, people like Simeon and Anna

With the beginning of the fulfilment of that longing in the arrival of Jesus, a beginning that is full of possibility for the consolation and redemption they longed for, and because of that is full, as we will see, of possibility of comfort and hope, and of challenge, for us

The story of Jesus to this point, despite the disruption of the census and birth in a stable, has had a promising beginning

Great things have been said to Mary about him before His birth by the angel Gabriel

He is said to be Son of the most high, son of God, reigning on the throne of David forever [1:31-33]

Zechariah, prophesying in the Spirit, has welcomed Him as a mighty Saviour who brings of freedom from oppressors, forgiveness, and peace [1:68-79]

This greatness has then been confirmed by the angelic choir at His birth

Who have identified Jesus as Saviour, Christ the LORD

Whose coming is good news, which brings joy

We don't know yet the path He will take to bring that promised salvation, but we know Mary's baby is the Saviour

And now as the story continues we see

Jesus' identity confirmed and reinforced vv. 21-28, 36-40

We learn more of the scope of the salvation he will bring vv. 29-33, salvation involving the whole world

And for the first time there is a suggestion that Jesus' pursuit of the salvation He came to bring will mean trouble and grief vv. 34-35

And that is all truth we need to reckon with as we continue to move through life with each passing year to our appointed end

Are reminded as we turn over the pages of the calendar of how fleeting our lives are, and as we have anniversaries of cyclones and tsunamis of the uncertainty that surrounds them.

Jesus' Identity Confirmed vv. 21-28, 36-40

[The Saviour – Simeon's testimony, which is Spirit given testimony vv. 26-30]

*Luke 2:<sup>25</sup> There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah. <sup>27</sup> Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup> Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said,*

*<sup>29</sup> Now, Master,  
you can dismiss your servant in peace,  
as you promised.*

*<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation.*

In the testimony of Simeon, we have again the testimony of the Spirit, of God, that this baby Jesus, brought up to the temple by his pious parents, is the Saviour.

Simeon takes Jesus in His arms and identifies Him as the salvation God is bringing to His people, because He is the Christ whom God has promised Simeon he would see before His death

And the passage confirms that He is the Saviour as He is the Jewish Saviour, a faithful Jew brought up in conformity to God's law

The Jewish Saviour vv. 21-24, 39-40

*Luke 2:<sup>21</sup> When the eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus—the name given by the angel before he was conceived. <sup>22</sup> And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (just as it is written in the law of the Lord, **Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord**) <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons).*

*v. 27 When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law*

*Luke 2:<sup>39</sup> When they had completed everything according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> The boy grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom, and God's grace was on him.*

Five times in this short passage that conformity to the law is explicitly spoken of

He is circumcised

He is dedicated to the Lord as the firstborn

He is born under the law

His parents are not rich, offering the purification sacrifice that law specifies for poorer people [Lev. 12:8],

But they are faithful Old covenant believers, and Jesus at every point from the beginning of his life is brought up conforming to the requirements of that covenant

From the beginning to the end of His life when He is crucified as King of the Jews, Jesus is the Jewish Saviour living under the law [Gal. 4:4]

And it is as the Jewish saviour He is the longed for Saviour

The longed for Saviour v. 25, 36-38

*Luke 2:<sup>25</sup> There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him.*

*Luke 2:<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,<sup>37</sup> and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers.<sup>38</sup> At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*

The lives of the two righteous and godly people we meet in this passage, Simeon and Anna, have been lived in expectation of God keeping His promises to comfort Israel and redeem Jerusalem

That is the language of the hope God gave His people, dispossessed and oppressed because of their sin, through the prophet Isaiah

Consider Isaiah 40, and Isaiah 61, both passages that feature in the gospel [3:4-6, 4:17-21]

*Isaiah 40: "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.*

*<sup>2</sup> "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and announce to her that her time of hard service is over, her iniquity has been pardoned, and she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."*

*Isaiah 61: The Spirit of the Lord God is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners;*

*<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of our God's vengeance; to comfort all who mourn,*

*<sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion; to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, festive oil instead of mourning, and splendid clothes instead of despair.*

*And they will be called righteous trees,  
planted by the Lord  
to glorify him.*

[cf Isaiah 54, 57]

Jerusalem, grieved and enslaved for her sin, a symbol of God's people, is promised in Isaiah a time when her God, the LORD, would act in compassion and mercy through His servant to free and restore her, so that she is again the place where God would dwell amongst His people

And in her restoration would be the realisation of all the blessings of covenant relationship with God

And so at the end of Isaiah God says

*Isaiah 66: <sup>10</sup> Be glad for Jerusalem and rejoice over her,  
all who love her.*

*Rejoice greatly with her,  
all who mourn over her—*

*<sup>11</sup> so that you may nurse and be satisfied  
from her comforting breast  
and drink deeply and delight yourselves  
from her glorious breasts.*

*<sup>12</sup> For this is what the Lord says:*

*I will make peace flow to her like a river,  
and the wealth of nations like a flood;  
you will nurse and be carried on her hip  
and bounced on her lap.*

*<sup>13</sup> As a mother comforts her son,  
so I will comfort you,  
and you will be comforted in Jerusalem.*

God's faithful people, living under foreign invaders and corrupt local rulers, looked to God to act in faithfulness to His word, to comfort and redeem His people and His city, to free them from idolatrous rulers.

Their hope was in God, and now Simeon and Anna have focused their and our hope, and the hope of all they spoke with, on this baby Jesus

As we are about in Luke's gospel to move into Jesus' ministry, we are in no doubt He is the Saviour, the Jewish Saviour, the longed for Saviour, confirmed by the Spirit given word.

It is important we Reckon with the necessity and reality of the Jewishness of Jesus

In this passage – He is light for the nations only as the servant of the LORD, the true Israelite

The glory of the people of Israel – only as He is an Israelite

In God's great plan of salvation revealed throughout His word, from the beginning.

He is only Saviour as He is seed of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, the one through whom all peoples on earth will be blessed [Gen 12:3], and believers in Jesus are only included in the salvation He brings as we are grafted into Abraham, become through faith Abraham's children [Romans 11, Romans 4]

Today, as in the past, many want to downplay the role and place of the Jews in God's plan, but Jesus is the Jewish saviour. No matter what you think of the actions of the government of the modern state of Israel, to be antisemitic is to deny a fundamental reality of our saviour and our salvation – that God has chosen to save the world through His dealings with the Jews, and that, as Paul says,

*Romans 11:<sup>28</sup> Regarding the gospel, they are enemies for your advantage, but regarding election, they are loved because of the patriarchs, <sup>29</sup> since God's gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable.*

They should be treated with the courtesy due to kinsmen of our Saviour, even if estranged.

In the context of Jesus being recognised as the Jewish Saviour Simeon, under the influence of the Spirit, now prophecies of the greatness of the salvation Jesus will bring

The Scope of His Salvation Confirmed vv. 30-32

*Luke 2:<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation.*

*<sup>31</sup> You have prepared it*

*in the presence of all peoples—*

*<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles*

*and glory to your people Israel.*

Simeon here says three things about this salvation which is embodied in Jesus

The focus of God's preparation

Firstly it is a salvation prepared

This is a salvation God has been preparing for throughout Israel's history, from His dealings with Abraham on.

There has been a direction and purpose in God's dealings in history, all moving to this point. Think of that. In Babylon's rise and fall, in Alexander's conquests, in the rise and spread of the Roman empire – God has been getting things ready for Jesus to save.

And God has not been acting in secret in preparing for the coming of this Saviour

*<sup>31</sup> You have prepared it*

*in the presence of all peoples—*

Through Israel's history of engagement with other nations, through judgement and prophecy, through exile, return and dispersion, God has been acting in public, on the world stage

And now in the execution of the salvation He has prepared, although Jesus' ministry is focused on Israel, it will be on public display to all nations, intersecting with their histories, starting with the Romans

Light for revelation Is. 42:1-6, 49:1-6

For it is a salvation that will be available to the nations, all peoples

Simeon speaks of Jesus as being light, light first for revelation to the Gentiles

This was prophesied to be the role of God's servant spoken of in Isaiah

*Isaiah 42: "This is my servant; I strengthen him,  
this is my chosen one; I delight in him.  
I have put my Spirit on him;  
he will bring justice to the nations.*

<sup>5</sup>*This is what God, the Lord, says—  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people on it  
and spirit to those who walk on it—*

<sup>6</sup>*"I am the Lord. I have called you  
for a righteous purpose,  
and I will hold you by your hand.  
I will watch over you, and I will appoint you  
to be a covenant for the people  
and a light to the nations,*

*Isaiah 49: <sup>5</sup>And now, says the Lord,  
who formed me from the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him  
so that Israel might be gathered to him;  
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,  
and my God is my strength—*

<sup>6</sup>*he says,  
"It is not enough for you to be my servant  
raising up the tribes of Jacob  
and restoring the protected ones of Israel.  
I will also make you a light for the nations,  
to be my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

Light is good, isn't it.

But think for a moment of what the servant of the Lord being a light to the nations implies

It implies they are in darkness.

This was not the way Greeks or Romans understood themselves. In fact, they saw things the other way around. They were the civilized people, the people who enjoyed the favour of the

gods, the people who were enlightened. All the rest were barbarians, and the Jews were backward, with strange beliefs and customs.

But it is the consistent judgement of Scripture that those who worship idols, no matter what their cultural achievement, their wealth, or their power, are in darkness.

They are ignorant of the true God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and so they are ignorant of how to live well in His world, living always in the shadow of death

And think of what it is to be in darkness.

It is to be fearful, for darkness hides your enemies

It is to be anxious, for darkness makes it hard to know where to place the next step.

It is isolating, for light, being able to see what others are like, what they are doing, is basic to trust.

Darkness brings misery

The Gentiles, the nations, with their many gods, were in darkness

They were trusting in things that cannot help, for being constructions of the human imagination they have no life or power [Ps. 115] in themselves

Living in a world of competing gods whose favour or grace had to be bought with sacrifices and rituals, they could never be secure, for an enemy may be earning the favour of another god, more powerful.

It was a worship that impoverished and enslaved, and for some meant the sacrifice even of their children to earn the favour of the gods

And because the favour of the gods was earned, the rich with their bigger and better sacrifices were entrenched in their privilege, entitled to their special treatment as the favourites of the gods

And it was a world exposed to the fearfulness of magic, where, by spells and sacrifice someone could bribe the gods, especially the god and spirits of the underworld, to do them favours, including harm their enemies – where the sickness of your child, or an accident at work, could be caused by the malicious working of someone unknown to you.

Paul speaks of the folly of idolatry and the disordered thinking and society it gives rise to in Romans 1

*Romans 1:28 And because they did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, God delivered them over to a corrupt mind so that they do what is not right. 29 They are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, quarrels, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, proud, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 senseless, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful. 32 Although they know God's just sentence—that those who practice such things deserve to die—they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them.*

An inconsistent society

The Gentiles were without God and without hope

But Jesus, the Jewish Saviour, will be light that will reveal the truth to all the nations and peoples

About God and the goodness of His reign – that HE is the living God for whom nothing is impossible, who always keeps His word, whose reign brings wholeness and peace, the God who can make Himself known

About His saving power, that He is the God who can forgive, who can rescue from condemnation, who can rescue from death, who can protect His people from all evil spirits

About His grace -that it is not earned by our works, but is kindness, free kindness, to the undeserving that flows from the treasures of His mercy and the depth of His love

About the goodness of His law and His justice 42:1, 3, 4, that His is a way to live that protects the weak and vulnerable, that can break the cycle of revenge

All this Jesus will reveal through His gospel that HE has died for sin, been buried, and risen

By being the Jewish saviour, the servant of the LORD, Jesus will be the Saviour of all people, the one who frees from fear and brings hope and peace,

And by being light He is also the glory of His people Israel

Glory. Isaiah 60:1-3 Romans 9:1-5, Romans 11:17-24

Israel was humiliated and despised

Its claim to special status mocked and resented

But Jesus, in being the Saviour who is the light of the nations, the light of the world

Has shown Israel to be truly, throughout their long history, God's chosen people

That the promises made to them, are true, made and now fulfilled by the living God who has chosen them to be His people, the God in whom they have put their hope

That the law by which they live, which singles them out amongst the nations, which Jesus kept perfectly, is seen to be the law of God, the way of justice and righteousness

Paul can list their privileges, which are validated by and reach their climax in the Christ

*Romans 9: <sup>4</sup>They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple service, and the promises. <sup>5</sup>The ancestors are theirs, and from them, by physical descent, came the Christ, who is God over all, praised forever. Amen.*

Simeon spoke those words over a baby, but the prophecy of Simeon was proven to be true by Jesus, by His ministry, death and rising. He is the light that cannot be extinguished by human rejection of God, by the devil's malice, by death, the light of the world whose word is true.



It is the light of a love that is stronger than all hate

Of free and generous grace to the undeserving

Of a hope which is sure and certain

Of truth that can be relied on completely

Of a way of life that is right and good

And Simeon's words continue to be true

Jesus remains the light who dispels our ignorance, the light we need to live with hope, live without fear, to know the path to take through life

To turn our back on him is to walk towards the darkness, to be enveloped in deeper and deeper darkness

Yet many today, as then, resent that claim

There is light, they will say, in other religions, including religions that reject Jesus

Or, as many do in our society, claim to have found enlightenment without God.

That humanity can find its way without Jesus, just by ourselves

But this new idolatry, this idolatry of humanity, of the individual reason, or feeling, or will

Promotes and spread the same darkness as the old

Lives of the vulnerable are sacrificed for the will and well being of the strong – whether in abortion, or the removal of protections from the weak to grant the strong a right to take their life

The sexual freedom it promotes brings unstable, insecure relationships that impoverish

Competing idols brings community confusion and conflict – think of the conflict over whether transgender women, men who identify as women on the basis of their feelings, are women between those who want feelings to be the shaper of reality, and those who think biological reality counts

And people die without hope

If you reject the idea that you are in darkness without the Lord Jesus, in darkness unless you rely on Him and the truthfulness of His word

Let me ask – what light do you have to dispel the darkness of death from your life and the lives of those around you

What hope do you offer?

And don't say it is the belief that this life is all there is, and after it you just rot.

To call light the extinction of light is to admit defeat, to acknowledge there is no light, just darkness

And reincarnation won't work, for it is more of the same with no escape from the wrong you have done

And let me ask, what light do you have to dispel the darkness of the selfish pursuit of pleasure and power, of hatred and revenge, from people's hearts, to set them free from what enslaves and destroys them?

Believers confess Jesus to be the light of revelation for the nations, and the challenge in the new year is not to be conformed to this world but to have our thinking shaped more and more by the light of Jesus, to see our world and our lives in the light of the truth He is and teaches

To let the light of the truth of the gospel flood your life, so as you live Jesus' way you in turn become light by a life rich in doing the good He teaches us

Whether that is in love of enemy, meekness, controlling anger, sexual purity, generosity, respect for all those made in God's image, saying no to the idols of money, pleasure and power, or the idols of our feelings or reason

Looking at Jesus, inspired by the Spirit, Simeon could say

*Luke 2:<sup>30</sup> For my eyes have seen your salvation.*

*<sup>31</sup> You have prepared it*

*in the presence of all peoples—*

*<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles*

*and glory to your people Israel.*

And for Mary and Joseph it is all so good, so positive up to this point

Even if a little overwhelming to be met with such enthusiasm by a stranger

It says Mary and Joseph are amazed – not because they have forgotten their own angelic meetings, or the testimony of the shepherds

But by Simeon's arrival and the force and certainty of the confirmation He gives to what they have already experienced, and

His fleshing out of the role of their child

But Simeon now sounds the first note of trouble ahead as he speaks of the nature of His ministry, the ministry by which He will be God's salvation

A warning of trouble and grief vv. 34-35

*Luke 2:<sup>33</sup> His father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary, "Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed— <sup>35</sup> and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."*

His ministry will bring division in Israel

It is not a ministry that will endorse the status quo

The reversals spoken of in Mary's song where the mighty are toppled from their thrones and the lowly exalted, will take place through Jesus' ministry

And Simeon's words suggest that Jesus' ministry will bring an ultimate division, for

'rising' in every other use in the New Testament is used for resurrection

He will mediate ultimate destinies

And not endorsing the status quo unsurprisingly even in Israel, who are meant to be God's people, His ministry will be opposed

A sign that will be Spoken against

Jesus' presence and ministry point to the reality of God and His rule over His people, of the righteousness God looks for in His people, that starts with faith

And faced with that demand, the demand they repent, turn back to acknowledge God's rule over their lives, people will seek to find fault, criticize, and contradict

But that opposition will not be a sign of the failure of Jesus' ministry, but of its success as the means by which God will exercise His searching judgement

*that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."*

Jesus' ministry as Saviour will expose what is there in the human heart – at the thinking, willing, feeling core of each person's being

His ministry, and how each person responds to it, will show where they are putting their trust – in God or themselves

Whom they are serving – God or their own wills and interests

In what they take pride, want to be known for – what God does for them by sending His Saviour, or their own achievements and possessions

Simeon says to Joseph and Mary your son's ministry will bring division, opposition, and mediate God's judgement

And as a consequence of the nature of His ministry Simeon says to Mary <sup>35</sup> *and a sword will pierce your own soul—*

Joseph died before Jesus began His ministry, but Mary will live to see it, and to know the grief it will bring

She will know anxiety about her son, and the course He has chosen, surrounded by relatives who at one stage think He is out of His mind [Mark 3:21, 32-34]

She will experience his rejection by her and his home town [Luke 4:16-30]

But especially she will know grief at his death, standing at the cross to witness His end [John 19:25-27]

The child she bore, and nursed

The child so dear and full of promise

Dying before her in pain, humiliated and mocked, and she helpless to bring any comfort or relief

Can you imagine the pain of that grief

Her heart will be wounded, just as her trust in the Lord's words will be tested, her own heart laid bare by the ministry of her son

But it will not be a wounding beyond healing, and her tested faith will be vindicated

She will live to see Jesus' resurrection, be amongst those [Acts 1:14, 2:1] who witness His exaltation in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on His disciples

### Going into the year ahead

There is both encouragement and challenge for us in Luke 2

There is the encouragement of knowing that the patient faith, the hopeful faith, of Simeon and Anna was vindicated.

Their God proved them right to put their hope in Him, to look to Him for comfort and redemption.

We can enter the new year knowing our God keeps His promises, and acts in mercy to those whose hope is in Him

And there is the encouragement of knowing Simeon spoke the truth

Simeon's words have been vindicated in the ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation of the Lord Jesus

Jesus is the Saviour, is the light of revelation for the nations, is the glory of His people Israel and there is no other

Living by His Word, in the light of His revelation, we know safety, freedom from fear, hope

For He brings us to know the living God as our God, and be assured of His steadfast love from which not even death can separate us

Our God by grace, not because we have made Him favourable to us, but because He has chosen to be gracious to us

And given His servant to die for our sins

And Listening to Jesus and doing all He teaches we can see the path to take in this world, the way that is life and leads to life

There is encouragement in Simeon's words

But there is challenge too

It is a reminder that Jesus' ministry, that comes to us in the gospel word, is a ministry that still reveals our hearts

That as we are reading and listening to His word, it is our hearts that are being tested

Tested to see whether we will listen, and believe, and obey – because Jesus is the Saviour

Or whether we will choose to trust ourselves

A reminder that the new year is not a year to become complacent, to stop heeding His word

And there is the challenge of knowing that the salvation Jesus brings, the light that HE has shone on and in our lives, is for all peoples

To paraphrase Isaiah 49

*Isaiah 49:<sup>6</sup> he says,*

*“It is not enough for you to be my servant*

*raising up the tribes of Jacob*

*and restoring the protected ones of Israel.*

*I will also make you a light for the nations,*

*to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.”*

It is not enough for the Lord Jesus to be Saviour in saving you and I

He is the light for the nations, and it is God’s will His salvation extends to the ends of the earth

And He has commanded us to love, and in love make disciples of all nations – which can only happen when they hear of Jesus

That command too is Jesus’ testing word, and what will it reveal of your heart this year

As it tests what you give your time and money to

What you direct your prayers to, your words to