

Christmas Eve: For the Falling and Rising of Many

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[0 : 00] The reading from which our teaching is based tonight is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, verses 22-35. And it's what happens when Jesus is brought to the temple when he's 40 days old for dedication.

So this is what Luke records for us. 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.

As it is written in the law of the Lord, every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

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, 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.

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, he took him up in his arms and he blessed God and said, Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word.

[1 : 13] For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.

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

This is God's holy word. Let me pray before we study it together. Lord, we ask now that you would help us to understand this last of Annunciation stories from the mouth of Simeon, and we pray, Lord, on this Christmas Eve that you would open our hearts to celebrate and rejoice in the love that you have shed abroad into this world through the Incarnation, and through Christ's coming and his death and his resurrection.

So we come as people with joy tonight. Advent is over. We celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ came in the middle of history to redeem. And so give us hearts of joy, hearts of celebration as we read this text for a few minutes and think about it before we go to our homes to celebrate more.

So we ask for this spirit, your spirit, Lord, to help us. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. We read the story of Jesus coming to the temple when he was 40 days old for purification and dedication.

[2 : 46] It's an unfamiliar Christmas story, not the most common Christmas story that people read, but it is part of the Christmas stories in the narrative, and it's actually an annunciation text. So there's a series of annunciations, announcements, that Christ, the Redeemer, the Messiah is coming into the world.

So you can think of the angels announcing to the shepherds or even announcing to Mary what was going to happen to her. Those are annunciation texts. And here we have one where Simeon announces it.

He says in verse 31, My eyes have seen the Lord's salvation. So he announces to the world. He's in the temple, actually, in Jerusalem, announcing to everyone, There is salvation, and my eyes have laid hold of salvation in this 40-day-old little baby boy.

But then right after that, unexpectedly, such a joyful thing to say. And then in verse 34, Simeon turns and says to Mary and Joseph, Behold, this child is appointed for the falling and the rising of many.

And it's very unexpected. Right after he's announced salvation has come, he says, This child is going to cause many to fall. And let's think about that on Christmas Eve.

[4 : 01] What does that mean? What does Simeon mean by that? So let's think about how Christ makes us fall, And then how Christ raises us up. Because that's what Simeon announces here. So first, how Christ makes us fall.

There's something difficult about Christmas. And this is what Simeon's talking about. So here's the scene. We're at this dedication of Jesus, 40-day-old baby. And we read here that the Holy Spirit had come to Simeon.

And the Holy Spirit had told Simeon, You are not going to die until you see, quote, the consolation of Israel. Not normal speech for us in the modern world, consolation.

We say comfort. So that's just a word that means comfort. And he said, You won't pass away until you've seen the comfort of Israel. Now there's a background to that. And the background is that Israel, the Jewish people, have been under occupation for centuries.

Roman occupation, Persian occupation, Babylonian. And so all the way back in the Old Testament, in Isaiah, God had prophesied and said things like, Comfort, comfort, or consolation, consolation to my people.

[5 : 07] One day, through a Messiah, you will receive comfort. And here, that's what Simeon sees. He says, There's the comfort. There's the consolation when he sees the baby Jesus. And then in verse 29 to 32, he sings a song, effectively.

We call it in Latin today, the nunc dimittis. That's just the Latin translation of the first line of Simeon's song. And it's the line from verse 29. Now you are letting your servant depart, nunc dimittis.

And so he sings that. He sees the baby boy. He says, There's the comfort that was promised from the Old Testament. And then he sings. And this song is what the scholars would call a full Christology.

So sometimes in the academy, New Testament scholars will ask, Did the Gospels really teach that Jesus actually is God? Do they even say that? And sometimes people say no, and that's a low Christology.

But here, the opposite is proven from the beginning. This is a very full Christology. Because Simeon in his song, just listen to a couple of things he says. He says, Now that you're here, I can depart.

[6 : 14] I can finally die in peace. So he says, I've seen salvation. And now I can face death with peace in my heart. And then right after that, he says, My eyes have seen salvation.

So it's probably the case that Simeon is holding Jesus the 40 day. He probably went over to Mary and Joseph and grabbed up baby Jesus, not to be advised in normal situations to go to a stranger like that.

But this is what Simeon does. And he says, I'm looking at salvation in this little baby. And he calls him the person salvation. And then he says, You've prepared the salvation for all people, a light to Israel and the Gentiles.

So he says, This is the light of the world, the salvation in a person for both Jews and Gentiles. And that means everybody. And so this is a very full statement. The Greek word that's used for this song is it says he eulogized God.

This is where we get our word eulogy. The text translates as he blessed God. And so we see here what Simeon thinks. But then, then the conflict statement, and that's right after that.

[7 : 23] Simeon said to Mary, verse 34, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall of many. So right after this song about the greatness of Jesus, his salvation, but this boy is appointed for people to fall.

It's literally a word that means to be ruined. And you say, What do you mean? He is salvation for Jews and Gentiles, and he's appointed for the fall of many people. And we can think about all sorts of other passages in the Gospels, like Mark 10, very similar.

Jesus says, Do not think I've come to bring peace. I've come to bring a sword. And then right after that, in a place like Mark 9, I've come so that you might be at peace with one another.

Or Luke 12, Do you think I've come to give peace on earth? No, I've come to bring division. Or John 14, Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled. So on the one hand, Simeon sings both.

And then Jesus says both. I've come to give peace on earth, to bring people together, to bring peace. And yet I've come for division. I've come to bring a sword. And you ask, Is there schizophrenia going on here in the Gospels?

[8 : 31] And Simeon says, It's both. How? And here's the answer, I think. Jesus Christ came into the world at Christmastime to a lost world, a world full of lost people, sopping wet with sin and death and misery all around us, to bring peace to us through conflict.

He came to bring peace through a conflict, with a sword, through the sword. I think that's what he means. Now you say, Well, that's not any clearer. Okay, well, what does that mean? That's fair.

Here's a way to think about it. Commentators will suggest that Simeon here is probably thinking when he says, He will cause many to fall.

He's probably thinking of another passage in Isaiah, where in Isaiah 8 we read about the Messiah that is to come, and it says, He will be a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling.

So when the Messiah comes, He will cause people to trip. People will be offended by him, stumble over him. And then Simeon says something like that. He's probably thinking of that from Isaiah 8.

[9 : 39] I was in 2017 in Germany in Stuttgart in Frankfurt. I thought it was going to be a really fun trip with a friend doing research, but actually I stood in a library for about 12 hours a day, photocopying manuscripts until I couldn't move my hands anymore.

But the little bit of Stuttgart in Frankfurt I did see, I was walking down the pavement once, and I've mentioned this at St. Seas before. I tripped, and I looked down, and there on the pavement is a little stone that's raised up above the pavement line.

It's not level. It's every city council's worst nightmare, health and safety hazard. And it's a 10-centimeter by 10-centimeter stone, and I noticed on it there was text written in Hebrew.

And I later learned what these were. These are Distoppersteine, the stumbling stones, and they were put in in 1996 across Germany, and they are meant for people to trip over.

And it's because they're memorials. They're put outside homes of Jews that were ripped from their home and taken to concentration camps. And so they put them outside the homes so that people will fall over them, be reminded.

[10 : 50] What are they being reminded of? They're there to remind us in this modern world of the fact that despite the stories of progress, the narratives that as a people we're getting better and better, that the 20th century had the most horrific evils that have ever been.

And you see, they're there for us to trip over, to remind ourselves, remember what the human heart is capable of, what's deep down inside. And that's the same thing. That's a biblical idea. Isaiah 8, Luke 2, when Jesus came into the world to cause the fall of many, he will be a rock of offense, a stone of stumbling.

Because when we see him, we're at first forced to trip over him, to smack against him and fall. Let me give you three ways that that's true, and I'll just list them.

The first is that his claims are so extreme. He's a rock of offense because his claims are so extreme. He says, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to God except through me. And then in another way in his time, he ate with those that were considered defiled in the culture.

[11 : 57] He broke all the customs and norms to reach out to the poor. However, he was offensive to the people in the time that he lived. But most importantly, the third thing, and I think this is what really Simeon's getting at, is when you encounter him, he exposes the truth of the human heart.

And we trip over him. We see his perfection. And we realize that we have stumbled. He becomes offensive to us in that way. He shows us what we really are.

He exposes us. And that's exactly what Simeon says down in verse 35. He says, The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed when the Messiah is revealed. The truth about who we are.

You see, Christmas first says that he came to show us that we are not the people God made us to be. There's a being exposed. That is the beginning of the Christmas message. That the incarnation is about salvation, but first it's about confrontation.

He came to confront in order to redeem. He came to cause a conflict. And that conflict begins inside the human soul to wrestle and to say, I'm not quite as independent as I thought I was.

[13 : 06] Here's a way to say it. Even when we think we're pretty good people, the reality of Christmas says, when you look down at the bottom of your heart, you're fundamentally selfish. And every person, Jew and Gentile, struggles with putting themselves at the center of the universe.

We, as one writer, I was reading a theologian, a new book recently, and he pointed me to this classic doctrine.

He called it the theology of the belly button. You may have heard that doctrine before. The theology of the belly button. What is it? It's the fact that we all, every human has a belly button. And that reminds us that we had an umbilical cord.

We came into this world wildly dependent. Not independent, not the center of the universe, no, but dependent. And the God who made us, we're made to be absolutely dependent on him, yet we live as if we're independent.

And Jesus comes in the incarnation first to expose that, to point us to see that. Secondly, finally, that confrontation, though, leads from falling to rising.

[14 : 09] So Simeon also says, yet, not only the fall, not only to be ruined, not only is he a rock of offense, but for the rising of many. Now, what does that mean as we finish? I think one way to think about it is through the lens of what he says to Mary, the mother of Jesus here in verse 35.

It's very helpful. He says to her, Mary, this is for you too. You will have a sword pierced through your heart also. So when he wants to explain what this means, that you will fall, but then you will rise, he says to Mary, this is for you too, Mary, and a sword will pierce through your heart as well.

We can think about what he means through this lens of how he says it to Mary. What does he mean? Commentators will say, well, look, here's what he's saying to Mary. Mary, you're going to have to, a sword is going to cut through your heart.

This is a metaphor, right? For pain and suffering. You're going to have to watch Jesus, your son, have a nation rise up against him, be betrayed, be murdered.

And the pain that that's going to cause her, a boy, a sword to the heart. Yes. But also we learn in the rest of the gospel, there are times where Mary is embarrassed by him and she struggles with him.

[15 : 22] And it's because it's the same thing for her. He exposes the truth of her heart as well. She's a sinner just like everybody else. So he's saying, Mary, this is you too. You're going to fall as well. You're exposed as a sinner when he comes, this boy of yours into the world.

But then what about this rise? What does it mean? The Greek word that's used here, the rising of many, is the word anastasis. And we know that word in English from names like anastasia.

That name, what does that name mean? It means resurrection. Normally this word anastasis means resurrection. He will cause the fall of many, but the rising of many, the anastasis, the resurrection of many.

And you see, he puts these things together and that's when we realize, and the commentators point this out, that not only is this a connection to Isaiah 8, but also Isaiah 28.

Isaiah 8, he will be a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense. Isaiah 28, but he will become the cornerstone. So he, Isaiah 8 and 28, a rock of falling, but also of raising again, a cornerstone, lifting the building back up again.

[16 : 32] Another way to say it, if we add what Simeon says is, the one who is the stumbling stone is now for us becoming the resurrection stone. The true cornerstone that's going to lift us back up again.

That's what he sings here in the song. The stumbling stone, you trip over him because he, when you stand in his presence, boy, the truth about who you really are comes out.

But then he turns and he says to Mary, a sword is going to pierce your heart. And that has to also mean somehow lift her up as well. It means this, I think, that the sword that's going to pierce her heart, pierce every human heart, is not the sword of judgment, but it's more like a surgeon's scalpel.

You can come with the sword of judgment that will kill, but the surgeon's scalpel, it cuts in order to heal. And Jesus Christ comes and he cuts. He first comes and he exposes us, but then that exposure, that cut, then we realize he's the great surgeon.

He's come to heal us. How does he do it? How does he do it? As we close. And let me just say this, it's hinted at in verse 23, because when he goes to be dedicated, verse 23 tells us that on that day, he was, the sacrifice made for his dedication was a pair of turtle doves and pigeons.

[17 : 55] And in the Old Testament and Leviticus, we learned that the poorest families would use turtle doves and pigeons for sacrifices, for dedications and purifications and things like that.

If you were wealthy, you would bring a lamb. If you didn't have any money, you would get a pair of turtle doves. And that's what happens in his case. And what we realize here, it's just hinted at. He's poor.

Jesus was the son of God who hung the stars is poor. And that's just a little shadow of what the text David read for us earlier in Philippians 2, that from the beginning to the end of his life, he was humiliated.

He made himself nothing. From the beginning of his life all the way to his death, his ultimate humiliation, what do we learn? The fall of many, but the rising, how does it happen? He took the sword of judgment, the sort of justice that we deserve at the cross is ultimate humiliation so we could have the surgeon's scalpel, so we could have peace, so the cut that he makes when we see our selfishness exposed by him would turn and we could lift up our heads and rejoice because in him it has all been healed.

He took the sword. He took the justice that we deserved in order to heal us. That's the whole story. So the incarnation tonight leads you to the cross. And here's what it asks you to do.

[19 : 16] Tonight is a night of worship. Tonight is a night of falling before him and saying, I realize that in the coming of Jesus my need is exposed and yet I'm also healed.

And that can be anybody's tonight. It can be yours, whether you're a believer or not. You come tonight and you can come to God in just a moment. I'm going to lead us in prayer and you can pray and you can say, Lord, I realize my need on this Christmas Eve.

And I once again look to the one who took the sword for me to give me healing that only you can give. Forgiveness, what is the city, our beautiful city, we love it. It gives you lights, it gives you department stores, it gives you presents, all fun stuff.

Jesus Christ, the truth about Christmas, gives you forgiveness and a clear conscience and gives you a promise that when you come to him, God will never let you out of his hand. He gives you hope in a future that is absolutely sure.

Let us pray. Father, we come to you on this Christmas Eve and we do pray and we acknowledge before you our need. We have a great need and we know that at Christmas we're exposed, the darkness within us, the selfishness, making the center of the universe us.

[20 : 29] It's a reality and yet the true center of the universe, you, Lord Jesus, you came and you died for us. The sword you took, a sword that we can't imagine, a sword of judgment.

Lord, we come tonight to thank you, to praise you, to give you worship and glory for that and then we pray, Lord, that our hearts tonight would be struck by the surgeon's scalpel, that we would be able to rejoice that our need has been met in Christ.

So thank you for the forgiveness that's on offer in Jesus and we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.