

A Baby

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[0 : 00] Well at Christmas the wise men, the magi are always very important characters for the culture, for the nativity sets, but this is a Christmas story.

If you read it you might have thought this doesn't really seem like a Christmas story, but you know that this happened at least a year before the wise men ever came on the stage in the chronology of Jesus' life.

This is a Christmas story, Semi and the Prophet. And the story is about Jesus as a little baby. That starts when he's only eight days old and then it comes to his first time at the temple in Jerusalem.

And you know I say this every time, there's so much in this passage. And that means we can only do some of it. And I know it sounds like an excuse, but it's true there's so much.

And one of the things that is really important for you to see from the outset is that the context of the passage is so definitively Jewish. It's a circumcision.

[0 : 59] It's prophets, it's sacrifices, it's consecrations, it's purifications. It's a prophecy and it's a prophecy about Israel. The context is so definitively set within the world of Judaism, the world Jesus was born into as a Jewish boy.

But the ultimate purpose of this prophetic passage is to say that the whole world is going to be polarized by this boy, by this baby.

The whole world will be polarized by him. You see, this is a Christmas story, but it doesn't really feel like a Christmas story. It's not, it doesn't feel that Christmassy. Herod and the wise men, Pharisees and tax collectors, Jesus came in the gospels.

If you give a careful read of the gospels, you'll see this, that Jesus came this passage is telling us to divide. This is only, this is eight days and 40 days.

We'll talk about the difference in the chronology here in just a minute after the nativity scene. This is what the prophet Simeon says, verse 34, did you catch it?

[2 : 06] Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and the rise of many in Israel and he's assigned to be opposed. So right at the heart of the early Christmas days, the first days of Jesus' life, there's a prophecy.

He's come to divide, he's come to be opposed. He's, Jesus, look, it's fundamental to the Christmas story. Jesus has come for a conflict.

He's come to pick a fight. And that conflict is the very route to peace, the peace that he came to bring. He came to establish peace, yes indeed, that's central to our Christmas messages, right?

But this passage tells us that he came to establish peace by going to war. This passage doesn't feel so Christmassy in that way.

But here's two central ideas that I just want to unfold with you from this passage for a moment. The first is that number one, Jesus calls his division. And number two, Jesus came to cut.

[3 : 13] Jesus calls his division and Jesus came to cut. So first, Jesus calls his division. So here's the scene. This is the baby, the boy.

He's been born in Bethlehem and he was circumcised on the eighth day. That's what we read about in verse 21. But then after that in verse 22, the time comes for purification and at the end, I'll talk a little bit about what that means.

But this is the 40th day of his life when he's come up to the temple in Jerusalem. This would have been the first visit to Jerusalem. This is before they would have fled to Egypt and run from Herod.

This is before the wise men would have ever come on the scene. And there's a man. He's an old man, it says. His name is Simeon. And we don't know much about him.

Simeon is a very common name in the first century for a Jewish man. Simeon, remember, was one of the sons of Leah. So he was one of the 12 tribes.

[4 : 11] So lots of boys would have been named Simeon. But what we do know is the text says that the Spirit was upon him. The Holy Spirit came. And the Holy Spirit came to tell him that he would not die until he saw what's called in the passage the consolation of Israel.

Now, what in the world is that? What in the world is the consolation of Israel? Consolation is the exact same word for comfort or comforter. Actually, the same word that's used right here for consolation is a word that Jesus will use in John for the Holy Spirit.

He will call him the parakelea, the helper, the comforter. And it's the same word he's looking for the comforter, the comforter of Israel. And here's probably what Simeon understood by that is simply this.

Israel all the way back in Genesis was promised by God land, a promised land, right? And a king and dominion, and that all the nations would come to them to find the true God.

And it doesn't look like that in the first century. They're under Roman occupation. They've lost their land. They don't have their Davidic monarch anymore. The tribes are in the diaspora. They're spread out all over the Roman Empire.

[5 : 18] Things just don't look like the promises that have been made. He's waiting for the comfort. He's waiting for the land to be restored, for the kingship to be restored. He's waiting for the Messiah.

He knows about the promises. Now, he sees the baby, right? He walks. He's in the temple court. He sees the baby out of his mother's hands.

Now, it's not normally good for strangers to walk up to moms in the public square and take the baby. This is not an example to follow. This is a one-off situation.

And it says, the text says that he started to bless God. So you'll see Simeon's song starting in verse 29. Now, literally it says that he took the baby up in his arms, and it literally says he eulogized God, and eulogy.

Eulogy is a Greek word, and we borrowed it for, we usually talk about it at funerals, but all it means is to speak well of. So it says he eulogized God. And did you catch all the things that he says in the eulogy of God, the blessing of God, about what this baby has come to do?

[6 : 24] Lord, now you're, this is verse 29. Lord, now you're letting your servant depart in peace. So the baby is going to give Simeon personal peace, a prophecy fulfilled.

So he's bringing Simeon peace at least. Then it's according to your word, the very next line. So he's fulfilling the scriptures. This little baby right here is fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies.

Then the next line, my eyes have seen your salvation that you've prepared in the presence of all peoples. So see what Simeon's saying there. He's saying, God, this baby is your salvation sent for not just Israel, for all peoples, everyone, all of us in here that are not Jews.

And he makes that clear in the next line, 32. He's to be a light for revelation to the Gentiles. He's even to be the revelation to the Gentiles that God is for them.

And for the glory to your people, Israel. He's going to bring glory. In other words, he's going to be the comforter of Israel. He's going to bring the promises, the Lamb, the King, all that back. Now Simeon has no idea what that's going to look like.

[7 : 26] But this is what he sees the baby being here for. But the central thing he says there, the one word that encapsulates it all is that he's to be a light.

And that's how John opens his gospel, that this baby is the light that has shone into the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. He's a light.

He's a light for the nations. He's a light in a dark world. Now so far so good because these are all the truths about Christmas that we really love.

The light come into the darkness. And the culture even loves a lot of these. And that's why at Christmas for a very long time people have put lights up all over the world, all over the streets, no matter how secular the culture is.

There will be lights on our streets every year. And the light, you know, why do we have Christmas at the darkest time of the year in the Western Hemisphere? You realize it's the darkest moment.

[8 : 26] I think December 21st, is that right? Is it the darkest day of the year here? There's a reason we put lights up in the darkest times of the year. It's an echo. It's a shadow of a boy, a light that came into the darkness.

Even the culture knows it, you see? And so far so good. These are truths that we know and love about Christmas. But then, but then verse 34, it's a transition.

Verse 34, And Simeon blessed them and he said to Mary his mother, and here's the prophecy. Behold, he hasn't prophesied yet. Now he's prophesying. Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and the rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed.

You see the transition? The light of the world and many will fall. And he will be opposed.

I was reading a book this week, a recent book that just came out on Christmas about Christmas. It's a great little book. And the author was talking about Christmas being, you know, how it's developed into the largest holiday in the Western Hemisphere and is increasingly so also the case in parts of the East.

[9 : 44] But really at the heart of our modern celebration of Christmas, there are two different Christmases being celebrated. To put it, let me give you an example, Gawker, the news website that's shut down now, but said this last year.

Christmas is a wonderful secular holiday. That was the title of the article. Christmas is a wonderful secular holiday. It's a time for family. It's a time for food. It's time for gifts.

He said it's time for putting aside differences for helping charities even. All of it. The music, the smells, the bells, the ethos of the culture at Christmas.

It's wonderful. And even what he describes as the most wonderful secular holiday of the year at Christmas, we say, I say, my family says, wonderful, all these things.

We love the smells and the bells of Christmas. We love the ethos. We like the music. We like the lights in the city. We like the gifts. We like all of it. We love the family time.

[10 : 45] We love the food on the table. We love, you know what, as Christians, we love that the culture loves those things because those are good things. Those are virtues to be celebrated and the culture celebrates them and we're happy for that.

But there's, every once in a while, there's a wonderful holiday intruder. You know, you could imagine a little boy or girl growing up with going Christmas shopping with mom every year and they're at the department stores on Princess Street.

And you know, the department stores, they play the music over the loudspeakers, the Christmas music and holly jolly Christmas, jingle bells, all these things. But every once in a while, even the department stores still do this.

Every once in a while, all of a sudden, that little boy, that little girl, after knowing all the songs, will hear a song that has lyrics like this. Hark, behold, the herald angels sing.

It's a command to the angels in heaven to sing out. And what are they to sing? They're to sing, he is born to bring them a second birth.

[11 : 56] And you know what? That's an awkward intruder into the modern idea of secular Christmas. That's an awkward intruder because the little boy at some point is like, catches on and says, I understand the holly jolly, I understand the jingle bells, but what in the world does it mean that he has come to give them second birth?

Right? Mom, you know, mom, what does that mean? What does this have to do with my favorite time of the year? It's, you see, it's the Christmas behind the Christmas.

There's a hidden Christmas in the modern world, a Christmas that stands behind the Christmas. And if there is one message that is so hidden from modern Christmas, one Christmas hidden to our current order of Christmas, it's Luke 234.

That Jesus, this little baby, circumcised on the eighth day, this little Jewish boy, will cause the fall and the rise of many. That's the hidden Christmas message.

What does it mean? What does it mean? Well, listen to these passages from the Gospels. Matthew 10, Jesus says this as a man, do not think I've come to bring peace on earth.

[13 : 12] Oh goodness. I came not to send peace, but a sword. Or Mark 950, he says, I've come so that you might have peace with one another.

Luke 1251, do you think I've come to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three.

They will be divided. Father against son, son against father. Mother against daughter, daughter against mother. Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. And daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

And, and John 14, peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. What does the world give, do I give to you? Let not your hearts be troubled, nor let it be fearful for my peace I leave with you.

So the Gospels say that Jesus came not to bring peace, but to divide, and that Jesus came to bring peace. Now which is it? And the answer is yes.

[14 : 20] The answer is yes. The answer is this, Jesus comes to bring peace through conflict. See? That's what this passage is about. He came to polarize.

He came to cause people to fall. In other words, there's no middle ground with this guy. There's no middle ground. Now what does it mean?

What does it mean here to fall? What does it mean when Simeon prophesies this about the fall? Most commentators recognize that this, when Simeon gives this prophecy, he's, he's has implicit here, he echoes of Isaiah.

And there's an implicit reference in both to rise, to fall and to rise to two different prophecies in the book of Isaiah. And the first one to fall makes reference implicitly to the stumbling stone.

And the stumbling stone was a prophecy in Isaiah. It's in 1st and Isaiah 814 and it says this, and he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both the houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

[15 : 24] And many will stumble on him. They shall fall and they shall be broken. So Simeon has implicit here. He's talking about a stone. Many will fall.

In other words, they will trip over him. This is the stumbling stone. He's the fulfillment of the prophecy from Isaiah. You know, I was in Germany this summer.

Many of you will have seen this before. In Germany from I think 1996, the government started a project called the Stolpersteine.

The Stolpersteine translates to the stumbling stones. And have people seen this? They've gone throughout Berlin and Stuttgart and all sorts of places and they've put little 10 centimeter by 10 centimeter concrete stones covered in brass all on the sidewalks throughout the cities of Germany.

And they've put them wherever a Jewish family was pulled out forcibly and murdered during the Holocaust outside of the previous homes of these Jewish families. And they're Stolpersteines.

[16 : 29] Well, that's Stolpersteine. They're stumbling stones. You're supposed to trip over them. You're supposed to not, you're supposed to notice them only after you've stood there, slightly raised above the ground.

And why did they do this? Because they want you to remember. They want you to remember what happened. But in my experience when I was there, and I was there with Andrew Close, who many of you will remember from our congregation, we were looking and stopping and reading them all in Stuttgart while we were there.

And what they said to me was something a little bit different. It wasn't just about remembering the Holocaust. The stumbling stones did more than that.

Because when you tripped over them, what they were meant to do, I think, is they were meant to expose you, expose me, expose us. It's not, you see, they were reminding us it's not just the Holocaust in one specific, it's exposing humanity.

That there's always been a problem in every generation, every century. Human beings can't help but stumble over these stumbling stones.

[17 : 37] You see, did you know that this Christmas, I saw this on The Atlantic this morning in my newsfeed, an American magazine, that they were talking about the real world on Christmas.

And the real world on Christmas were all the wars at Christmas. Did you know that this Christmas there will be 31 wars being fought while we eat our Christmas lunch? 31 wars right now going on in the world.

And it's always been like this the whole 20th and 21st century. Where people in conflict, you see, Jesus, when it says that Jesus came to divide, he came to a world divided.

He came to bring peace in the midst of a conflict that was already happening. People broken, set against one another. And the thing about him is that you can't help but trip over him.

It's not just that he will cause many to fall. He causes everybody to fall. You can't help but trip over him. See, the Isaiah prophecy is he is the stumbling stone. Everybody trips over him because it's just like the Stolpersteiner.

[18 : 38] When you see him, you have to fall. What does this mean? What am I saying? What does it mean to fall? What does it mean that he exposes us?

How? Well, just think of this example. What causes people to trip over him? One of the main things that causes people, all of us to trip over him, is his claims in the Gospels.

You know that Jesus is so self-centered? Have you realized? Have you read the Gospels? Jesus is so self-centered. Listen to some of the things he said.

He said that anyone on earth who was heavy and weary laden with a burden of life could come to him and he would take it from them. He said that he was the only way that any person could ever see God.

He said that he was the light of the world. He said that he was the bread of life. He said that he was the water of heaven that could give life.

[19 : 38] He came to earth to tell people that he was their God no matter what they thought about him. The John's prophecy in John chapter 1, this is the light of the world that's come into darkness.

You see, his very presence is a statement to the world that it's in darkness and that he's the answer. He's entirely self-centered in his claims about who he is.

He claims to be God. You see, look, here's the point. It's not just that some people trip over this fellow. It's that everybody has to trip over him when you come and actually wrestle with the claims that he made, when you come and actually look at what he said about himself and what other people recognized him to be.

If you read the Gospels, if you give the historical record some credence, you have to trip over this guy. You have to fall down.

You have to fall over and decide which way you're going to go with him. See, the point is that it's an either or rise or fall. He polarized in this way that he didn't come to offer niceness, to offer a middle ground.

[20 : 45] He came and said, you either come to love me or you come to hate me. He was opposed. The incarnation, that's what we're celebrating at Christmas, is the incarnation.

God become man. The incarnation, one of the central points of the incarnation is that when Jesus became man, it was God's pronouncement to the world of judgment.

Have you ever thought of the incarnation that way? The fact that Jesus, that God had to become man, is the fact that God had to judge the world.

You see, Jesus' birth is a statement. It's a statement that says, all of us, all of us human beings, we're never going to be what we ought to have been apart from help outside of the cosmos.

It's a judgment. Before anyone can ever say yes to this man, it requires a realization that the incarnation is telling you that you are not okay, that you didn't have it together.

[21 : 46] But at the very same time, in the midst of God's pronouncement of judgment, in the midst of a man who said that he was God, come to save you from the darkness, people were attracted to him.

Why? Why were people so attracted to him? Because in the midst of the pronouncement of judgment, there was a reckless, inconceivable love.

In the midst of the people that stand entirely opposed to him, the incarnation is the statement that he would come for them anyway, because he loved them so. You see, it's simultaneously the great statement of judgment on the earth and the greatest statement of God's most reckless love for humanity, for the cosmos.

It's the story of God's romance with people, taking them back for himself from the curse that has stricken them. Just think about this.

These claims were totally self-focused. I am God and you need me. You will have no life without me. But how did he make those claims known?

[23 : 00] He abandoned all sense of cultural norms and rules. He ate with the most vile. He touched the leper. He washed the feet of his own servants. He loved like he was from the lowest strata of the society.

He would perform miracles on the worst of sinners, on the biggest outcast, and then he would tell them not to tell anyone about it so he didn't get attention. And then he would turn around and command the winds to obey him.

You see, he came with authority. He came with the claims to be God and he came with the most self-abandoning love that there's ever been in history.

He demanded adoration. He demanded that people understand themselves to be messed up. Now today at Christmas in our culture, plenty of people are going to like Jesus this year, just like every other year.

Everybody likes Jesus at Christmas. Of course, we love the nativity scenes. Everybody in the culture, no matter what you think about him ultimately, you like Jesus. He's a swell fella.

[24 : 06] Every nativity scene will have the smiling cows and the nice little sheep. And people will be listening to joy to the world and even singing it themselves no matter what they think about him.

And here's the point, the first point. Few are willing to pay attention to the historical record. To actually look at the text and to consider the claims.

And the claims that Jesus made mean this, that he didn't ask to be liked. He didn't ask to be liked. He demanded to be loved, to be adored, to be called God.

He demanded to have the world fall before him and worship him. Secondly, and finally briefly, we'll be much more brief here. Jesus also came to cut.

Jesus came to cut. Now what is it, we've talked about what it means that we trip, that we fall. But what does it mean to rise? The second part of Simeon's prophecy. What does it mean to rise?

[25 : 11] You know how we know that everybody in this passage is talking about everybody has to fall because then it says, and some will rise, many will rise. Well, the presupposition of rising is that you've fallen over, right?

In order to rise, you have to have fallen. And so everybody is going to fall before him, but many will rise. And what does that mean? And there's two clues that we get in this passage about what it means.

In the midst of his prophecy, he turns to marry the mother. And he says to her, he will pierce your soul too with a sword. It's a little parenthetical comment as if she wasn't paying attention or something.

Hey, he's going to pierce your soul too with a sword. What does that mean? Well, in the first place, he's going to cause her a lot of pain. Many of you are mothers and you know what it's like to love a baby and Mary loves this baby.

And he's going to have a nation set against him as a young man. And he is going to be beaten and murdered.

[26 : 16] And she's going to watch the whole thing. And it's going to cause her, it's a terrible thing to see your child go before you. And she's going to watch it happen. And the most simple way, marry the mother of God, marry the mother of this baby, there's going to be much grief in her life because of him.

But it doesn't just mean that. It means more than that. We'll come back to this in just one minute. The second clue is to what it means besides the fact that he gives us a little hint about what it might mean to rise by talking to Mary about being cut, about being pierced.

The second thing is that the word for rise here is the little Greek word anastasis. Anastasis almost every other place in the New Testament isn't translated rise, it's translated resurrection.

See, what it says here is that he will cause us to fall and he will cause us resurrection. That's what it's saying.

Now we said that the idea of falling, tripping over a stone, a stumbling stone is being implied here from Isaiah. There's also another reference from Isaiah being implied about rising up that commentators say and it's from Isaiah 28.

[27 : 27] And it says this, see I've laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious corner stone for a sure foundation. For the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic, but they will rise up.

The second prophecy is about a stone that would be laid, about a stone that would be the foundation of a resurrection. It's a resurrection, you know what I'm saying? He will be the resurrection stone.

All my Harry Potter fans in here, you know exactly what we're, J.K. Rowling, she was working with the resurrection, the only way for Harry Potter to be a great story, it had to end with a resurrection stone. It's a mimic of Jesus' life.

But the real, the better story is that Jesus Christ would be the cornerstone, the resurrection stone upon which a kingdom would be built. Now how do we get this?

After we fall and how do we get this resurrection based off the resurrection stone? So it comes back to everything that, and we'll close with this, everything that Simeon has to say to Mary in this little parenthetical phrase that you will be pierced.

[28 : 30] You will be cut all the way down to your soul. What does it mean? You know even the mother of God had to wrestle with claims about this guy. She struggled in her life when Jesus walked around with authority claiming to be God.

She had times of struggle in her life and even she struggled with who he was at times. But this sword that she's going to be pierced with is not just a prophecy for her.

It's a prophecy for anyone who wants to rise with him. It's not the sword of a warrior, but it's the subtle knife of a surgeon. That's the sword that she's going to be pierced with.

Not the sword of the warrior on judgment day, but the subtle knife of the surgeon. See anybody who wrestles with the claims of Jesus, who looks at the historical record, and who loves this man, who sees this man as God, he comes to you with the subtle knife, the scalpel of the surgeon.

What does that mean? Scalpels hurt, right? Some of you are doctors or medical people. Scalpels hurt, but what's the point of purpose of a scalpel? It's not to kill, it's not to play the judge.

[29 : 42] The purpose of the scalpel when they pierce your heart, even when they pierce all the way down to your heart, is that they cut you open in order to heal you. You see?

What's being said here is that for you, Mary, and for all of you who have fallen over in front of this guy, that you've been exposed by him, and you all have, all of us.

It means that if you will turn to him and you will love him, you will experience not the sort of judgment, but the surgeon's scalpel. You will be cut just in such a precise way that you can be put back together again.

And it hurts, and it heals. You see, it's ultimate peace, but only through conflict. And how is it possible?

Because we deserve the sort of judgment, and he fell on it for us. We'll close with this. And just a slight reference to how this happened in this passage.

[30 : 39] I just want to explain it to you for 30 seconds. The second time, the second, there's a first ceremony in this passage. Jesus was circumcised in obedience with the law. But the second ceremony after that is that Jesus is taken back up to the temple for purification.

And what this means is this is his first born consecration. It's a fulfillment of Leviticus, Levitical code from Leviticus 12. And it was commanded to remember the Passover that just like Israel is the firstborn of God's, it's his inheritance.

So all little boys represent the firstborn of the family, that the family will be God's possession. But what's not, that's not the most important. What's the most important just real quickly is that Mary and Joseph offer, it says, a pigeon and two turtle doves.

And that's just something we pass over, but it's so important. You see, in Leviticus 12, when you're going to consecrate the firstborn, there's commands about what type of a sacrifice you are to give.

And there are different levels of economic strata that people exist in according to a particular type of animal they are to sacrifice. Do you know that the pigeon and the turtle dove is for the poorest of the poor?

[31 : 59] In Leviticus 12, it says, if you have no money, if you've got nothing, if you're poor in this world, then bring a pigeon. They're basically free.

You can't bring a heifer, you can't bring a sheep, bring a pigeon. You see, he was born in a stable. Don't trivialize the nativity scene with smiling cows, there weren't any.

He was born in a feed trough with the slop in the muck of the animals. And if you've had a baby, you know that that's a serious thing. It's not a joke. It's very dangerous.

And even here, we see the little boy born to a family that could do nothing but give a free pigeon for his consecration. You see, he was humiliated from day one. And he's our substitute.

He was humiliated in every way that we deserved to be, all the way to the point of death, falling on his own sort of judgment. You see, the way that Jesus Christ came to establish peace was through war with death.

[32 : 59] And the way he went to war with death and evil was by succumbing to it. It's the grand irony of all of history. And he did it for us, for you and for me.

He was God, the creator of the universe, become man, become baby, come to die from the outset, even in the way he sacrifices nothing but a pigeon.

And he came to pierce our hearts with a sword. That means, last thing we'll say, is repentance.

Repentance is the great sword, the great dagger. Repentance hurts. Repentance is saying that you are not what you ought to be, and that hurts. It's knowing yourself to be a sinner, and no matter if you're not a Christian, if you're struggling with the claims of Jesus, if you've tripped over him and can't get up, or if you've been in the church for 80 years, you need repentance this Christmas.

It's the sword that you need to cut your heart to be healed again every day. It's for both Christian and non-Christian. It's the invitation that's being offered to you from this passage to be pierced with the sword of repentance.

[34 : 09] The God-man who lives eternally came to fight a war with death so that we could have the healing cut of the scalpel instead of the spear of the judge. Let's pray.

Father, we ask O God that you would make yourself known to us in such a way that we would feel the scalpel today and not the judge's sword. So we look to the baby.

The little baby helpless. He has to be fed. He has to be changed. He's poor. And we see ourselves poor in spirit.

And him is our substitute. O that you, O God, became man. What a mystery. What a wonder. We give thanks this Christmas. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.