

**CHRISTMAS CHARACTERS:  
LIFE LESSONS FROM THE 'LESSER' KNOWN CHARACTERS  
IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY:  
"SIMEON AND ANNA:  
CAN NOW DIE IN PEACE"**

Well, were your expectations of Christmas exceeded or disappointed? You see, partially at least, what you expect, determines what you receive. If you expected this Christmas to exceed all others, you may have been disappointed. If you expected a good time with family and friends, and a faith-filled holiday, you were likely pleased. This morning we are going to meet the last of our 'lesser-known' characters in the Christmas story. They had some amazing expectations, some life-long dearly held hopes, and with the birth of the Christ Child just a few days ago, their expectations were definitely exceeded! Let's listen to the story of Simeon and Anna:

*21 Eight days later, when the baby was circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel even before he was conceived. 22 Then it was time for the purification offering, as required by the Law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. 23 The law of the Lord says, "If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the Lord." 24 So they offered a sacrifice according to what was required in the law of the Lord – "either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." 25 Now there was a man named Simeon who lived in Jerusalem. He was a righteous man and very devout. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he eagerly expected the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. 26 The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, 28 Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 "Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, 30 I have seen the Savior 31 you have given to all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" 33 Joseph and Mary were amazed at what was being said about Jesus.*

*34 Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, "This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others. 35 Thus, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul." 36 Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, and was very old. She was a widow, for her husband had died when they had been married only seven years. 37 She was now eighty-four years old. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. 38 She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about Jesus to everyone who had been waiting for the promised King to come and deliver Jerusalem. 39 When Jesus' parents had fulfilled all the requirements of the law of the Lord, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. 40 There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom beyond his years, and God placed his special favor upon him.*

Luke 2: 21-40

We have learned some remarkable lessons from some of the Christmas Story's lesser characters, today will hopefully be no exception. This not-by-chance encounter in the Jerusalem Temple fulfilled the life longing of both Simeon and Anna, and allowed them to utter almost in unison: "Now, I can die in Peace." What happened to fulfill their expectations and what can we learn from these lesser folks? Three remarkable things:

**1. THEY MAINTAINED THEIR HOLINESS, WHICH GAVE THEM THEIR HOPE.**

*"He was a righteous man and very devout (she fasted and prayed day and night in the temple). He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and eagerly expected the Messiah to come." 2: 25 & 37*

The overarching impression of these two people is that they were devoted to God and God's temple. Simeon was described as devout and righteous. The Holy Spirit apparently had him on speed dial, and Simeon apparently answered every call. Anna, widowed young, might have remarried and rejoined society, fulfilling every woman's greatest hope at the time, to be a wife and mother, but she choose instead to devote her life to serving, fasting and praying to God, in God's temple.

Neither of their lives are remarkable for any other reason than what I have just mentioned, yet they have such resilient hope, such sustaining hope, such joy producing hope...how? Their holiness gave them their hope...and it must give us ours!

We can find little cause for hope in our world today. War and fear, and terror, and secularism, and lawsuits; coupled with rising health care and diminishing social security have done anything but instill any hope for our future. That is precisely the point: our hope is not from this world, or in this world. Jesus said it plainly, *‘in the world you will have troubles, but be of good cheer, hang on to your hope, why...because I have overcome the world!’*

Simeon and Anna lived in equally desperate times. The Roman Government was destroying anything and everything Jewish, in its pathway to dominion. Not unlike secularism in our society today. People were flaunting their sinfulness, mocking any law but themselves, indulging in any and every pleasure that tickled their fancy. Not unlike life in many places in America today. And still these two simple believers, were unable to give up hope, why...because of their close relationship with God.

Have you been tempted to give up hope in light of life in our world today? I have...but we can't! As Christians we are prisoners of hope! We must cling tightly to God, and find our hope not only sustained, but renewed. That's the first lesson from Simeon and Anna.

## **2. THEY RECOGNIZED JESUS WAS THE MESSIAH, FOR ALL.**

*“Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, I have seen the Savior you have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel.’” 28-29*

Most of the Jews were well acquainted with the OT prophecies that spoke of the Messiah's blessings to their nation. But they did not always give equal attention to the prophecies declaring that the Messiah would also bring salvation to the entire world, not just the Jews (Is 49:6).

Many thought that Christ had come to save only his own people. Luke made sure his Greek audience understood that Christ had come to save all who believe; Gentiles as well as Jews. He makes it part of Simeon's declaration, and at least all the Gentiles who heard it and read it would certainly appreciate it! I know I do!

This lesson must not fall on our own deaf ears! God didn't send Jesus to save only Americans, or white skinned people, or those well dressed, or those well learned, or those with Methodist leanings, or even Evangelical backgrounds. God sent Jesus to save all people from their sins. Sometimes it seems that those who have been forgiven, forget that we were once sinners, for whom Christ died. We get put out or put off by people who are lost in their sins. They are lost, what do we expect? We can't let our high steeple preferences, isolate us from those Jesus identified in need of the physician. We've got the Good News, and it is this world's only medicine! And unlike the flu vaccine, there is plenty to go around!

Here Simeon stands holding Jesus. The one, who has known for years that God holds him firmly in the palm of God's hand, now holds the baby God, in his, how amazing. Here stands Simeon, an old man, maybe representing the Old Covenant; about to give way to the new, all the promises that have been made by God...everyone of them...are now being held in his arms. He is holding the promise. He is the salvation for all humankind...men, women and children. No one has to live in darkness anymore. Everyone can know the truth. Simeon and Anna have looked for years, have waited for ever, and this day, this baby is singled out, not by Simeon and Anna, not by Mary and Joseph, but by God, through the Holy Spirit, and these dear saints testify to the identity of this unusual child. The world will never be the same.

### **3. THEY PREDICTED THE OUTCOME OF JESUS' LIFE AND DEATH**

*"This child will be rejected by many in Israel, and it will be their undoing. But he will be the greatest joy to many others. Thus, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."* 34-35

While holding this dear child in his arms, with proud parents looking on; after all those waiting, longing years, Simeon and Anna see their Messiah. Before Simeon returns this precious child to his beloved parents he prophesies what would come of their little baby. Doesn't every parent want to know what will come of their children? Maybe not in this case!

Simeon remarks that this Jesus would have a paradoxical effect on Israel, frankly, on the whole world. Joseph and Mary are likely a bit dumbfounded. With all they had been through, one more strange message, from another strange messenger made them look at each other and probably shake their heads. This chance temple encounter was more than just some old man and another old woman coddling and cooing over another new baby in God's House. *"Some will fall because of him, while others will rise."* There is likely no more poignant word in all of Holy Writ. There is no more succinct declaration of the effect Jesus will have on this age than this word. *"Some will fall because of him, while others will rise."* With Jesus there would be no neutral ground: People would either joyfully accept Him or totally reject him. And, oh by the way, Mary, your grief at his rejection will wound you like a double-edged sword.

Simeon was quoting the familiar scripture he had studied for years; probably read it again in devotions that very morning:

*"Do not fear anything except the Lord Almighty. He alone is the Holy One. If you fear him you need fear nothing else. He will keep you safe. But to Israel and Judah he will be a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."*

Isaiah 8: 13-14

Or maybe the verse he meditated on yesterday prompted his prophecy:

*"But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture".* Malachi 4:2

It all comes down to this choice, doesn't it? Accept or reject. "*Some will fall because of him, while others will rise.*" What about you? It all comes down to a choice. Jesus' place in this world makes us choose.

It started a few months ago; Zechariah and Elizabeth faced a choice, to believe God or languish in their childless shame. Their son John faced a choice; envy and jealousy or graciously give way to the Savior of the world. A few months later, a bunch of simple shepherds choose to abandon their sheep, to discover their shepherd. A few weeks earlier, a virgin teenager choose to accept God's gift, and a respected middle age tradesman choose to honor God and his fiancé by choosing to do the right thing. Here, now an aged old man, and an older widow, make a choice to devote their lives to patiently and expectantly waiting for God's greatest gift, and finally it comes.

We have the same choice! We can go on living our lives devoid of God, filled with doubt, despair, and doom, or we can choose to surrender our lives to the Savior of the world. Not the babe in the manger, but the coming King of Glory. He came once as the Messiah Baby, when He comes again, he'll be the King of Kings, and Lord of Lord's, and He shall reign forever and ever. Every knee shall bow, some in grateful humility, some in fearful humiliation. It's our choice, and ours alone! And not to decide, is to decide!

Simeon and Anna made a choice to hang onto God's Hope until the Messiah was born. Now, they were ready to die, in peace. Are you? Are you ready to die, are you ready to die in peace. Let us pray.

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