

“What Child Is This?”

Luke 2:21-40

Be finding your place in the second chapter of Luke. We have been in these first couple of chapters for the last several weeks. In these chapters, we are told of two very remarkable births, one of those being that of John the Baptist, the one whose sole purpose in life would be to introduce the Savior to the world. Of course, the other remarkable birth is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Babies don't remain in infancy very long. They grow and become children. Those children become adolescents and then teenagers who ask you for the car keys. Before you know it, those teenagers become young men and women who are out on their own ready to conquer the world.

Some 99% of the gospels primarily deal with approximately three and a half years of Jesus' life from age 30 to 33. And only 1% are devoted to events that happened before those years such as His birth and childhood. Outside of what Luke tells here in the second chapter of his gospel, there is virtually nothing else that we know about the boyhood of Jesus. Yet what we are told is really all that we need to know—He grew just as any other child. And yet at the same time, He was not like any other child. This holy Child was God in human flesh.

William Chatterton Dix was a man who lived in the mid 1800's. He was the son of a well known surgeon who lived in Bristol, England. As a young man, Dix became a rather successful business man. He moved up in the ranks of an insurance company that was based in Glasgow, Scotland. Things were going extremely well in his life until something unforeseen happened. He became seriously ill and was confined to his bed for an extended period of time. The bottom fell out of his life. From his sickbed, he took to reading the gospels and became intrigued by the life and ministry of Jesus, so much so that he became a

Christian and began writing poetry. One of the poems that he wrote he also set to the tune of ‘Greensleeves.’ You know it simply as, “What Child Is This?”

*What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

Well, when you and I read what Luke has written here, we might also ask the same question—What Child is this?

From verse 20 to verse 21, the scene shifts from the nativity in Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem. In his orderly account, Luke is going to show us how Jesus is legally qualified to be our Savior. No less than five times in these verses does he refer to the ‘Law of Moses.’ He also will introduce us to a couple of eyewitnesses, both of whom will testify that the infant Jesus is indeed Israel’s long awaited Messiah. Notice three things involved here:

1. IDENTIFICATION with Israel’s covenant (2:21)

“And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

We might well be tempted to skip over passages like this that seem to record insignificant details that appear to be unrelated to us. However, the fact that Jesus is subjected to Jewish legal requirements has great significance. It shows

us that Christ has come to identify with Abraham's descendants and, as such, He is the embodiment of all that God had promised the patriarchs.

The details of the Abrahamic Covenant and all it involved are found in Genesis 17...

On the eighth day of his infant life, a Jewish baby boy was to be circumcised, at which time his parents announced his name. All of this would later be specified in the law.

Why was this the sign of the covenant? It was the mark of Israel's national identity that would distinguish them from their neighbors. And beyond that, it served as a painful and visible object lesson of the need for cleansing from the depravity of sin, which is passed down from one generation to the next. It served as a physical symbol of the spiritual cleansing of the heart that takes place at salvation.

Deuteronomy 10:12-16—“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord...Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”

Deuteronomy 30:6—“And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

It is the heart that God is concerned with. It has always been the heart. And God gave an outward, tangible sign to illustrate this throughout the generations of Israel.

By closely following the Law of Moses, and through bearing the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, Jesus became identified with the nation of Israel. He had no sin of His own. He didn't have a heart that was in need of cleansing. He is the sinless, perfect Son of God. Yet He came to fulfill the demands of the Law.

This is the point made by the apostle Paul:

Galatians 4:4-5—“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Even from His infancy, Jesus keeps the law perfectly and will do so throughout His entire life. And only because He did so could His righteousness be credited to those who trust Him in faith. You need righteousness in order to go to heaven. And none of us have any righteousness on our own merit. That's why we need Christ.

Donald Grey Barnhouse—*“His circumcision was His first suffering for us...It symbolized the work the Savior did on the cross in dealing with our sin nature.”*

Though Jewish circumcision was intended to convey a spiritual truth, it became an empty ritual and a source of prideful boasting on the part of those who had forgotten its true significance. Paul deals with these 'Judiazers.'

Galatians 6:14-17—“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.”

This is even conveyed in the name that He is given. As the baby is circumcised on the eighth day as the law required, it was then that Mary and Joseph declared His name.

“Jesus” — *the Lord saves*

Matthew 1:21 — **“She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”**

His name is a statement of His deity. He came to identify with those in need of salvation, and salvation is found only in Him. And as Peter says in Acts 4:12, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

2. PRESENTATION according to Mosaic law (2:22-24)

“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 turtledoves, or two young pigeons.’”

Just as the Law of Moses stated that Jewish males were to be circumcised on the eighth day, it also stated that there was a process of purification after childbirth for the mother. All of this is specified in Leviticus 12.

Again, look at all the references that Luke makes to Mosaic law—“according the Law of Moses” in verse 22, or “as it is written in the Law of the Lord” in verse 23, and again “the Law of the Lord” in verse 24, or “according to the custom of the Law” in verse 27, and then “according to the Law of the Lord” in verse 39. That’s five total references to the Law of Moses.

As a firstborn Son, the law also stated that Jesus had to be presented in the temple as holy to God. This goes all the way back to the Exodus. God's judgment on the Egyptians in the form of the tenth plague involved the death of their firstborn. The firstborn Israelites, however, were spared from the judgment because a 'passover' lamb died in their place. From then on in Israel's history, all firstborn males were devoted to the Lord. They were set apart as His special possession for His own special purpose.

God describes the symbolism to Moses in Exodus 13...

It was a reminder that God ransomed the Israelite firstborn from death. Just as Israel's firstborn were redeemed with a Passover lamb, the law demanded that all future firstborn be redeemed with a lamb that must die in their place.

Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple where He is presented to the Lord, and it involved a sacrifice. It was recognition that He belonged to the Lord.

Leviticus 12:6-8—“And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering...And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons.”

The law said that the poor could offer a pair of doves as an offering. The fact that Mary and Joseph can't afford a lamb shows that they were poor. However, in a way that they themselves didn't fully realize at the time, the Lamb was in their arms.

Now let me tell you why all of this is important. Because whether you realize it or not, it is very important. When He later began His ministry, Jesus said:

Matthew 5:17—“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

Luke 16:17—“But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.”

From the beginning of His life on earth, before He ever uttered His first word or exercised His will as a human being, Jesus Christ fulfilled the requirements of God’s Law and therefore is uniquely qualified to be our Lamb.

He is sinless and perfect in every way. It had to be this way, because we could not be saved otherwise.

Galatians 2:16-21—“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”

3. VERIFICATION of God’s saving purpose (2:25-40)

“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.”

Being the careful historian that he is, Luke is going to show us how all of this is backed up by eyewitness testimony. While Mary and Joseph are there in Jerusalem, as they are making their way into the temple complex, Luke says that

they are met by a man whose name is Simeon. And notice how Luke describes him:

- Righteous and devout
- Waiting for the consolation of Israel
- The Holy Spirit was upon him

It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. While the world around him was going about its business, Simeon was waiting and watching for the Savior.

Charles Swindoll — *“While Augustus Caesar strutted the marbled floors of his palace pulling the strings of power to suit his own agenda, while Herod maniacally searched out and destroyed potential rivals to his ill-gotten throne, and while religious leaders skimmed money from the temple treasury and twisted Judaism to suit their perverse list for power, God’s people quietly prayed for the coming of the Messiah.”*

Isn't that just the way things are now? Our world is busy with prioritizing money, power, and self-gratification at any cost. The world is busy giving its opinion on social matters, political matters, entertainment matters. You want to know something that will absolutely blow your mind? Before I finish this sentence, there will be:

- 31.25 million messages sent on Facebook
- 347,222 tweets made on Twitter
- 48,611 pictures posted on Instagram
- 300 hours of video uploaded to Youtube

The population of the world now consists of over 7.7 billion people. Worldwide, there are 258 births per minute which averages out to 4.3 births every second. There are more than 15,000 births per hour, and just over 6,000 deaths per hour all around the world. Before the day is over, the world population will include over 200,000 more people than it did this morning. And it happens this way every day.

Yes, the world around us is very busy. All of us in this room are very busy. But are we watching and waiting for Christ to come? Simeon was!

Notice what else Luke says about Simeon in verse 27:

“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 blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; 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 mother marveled at what was said about him.”

What he says here is really a song of praise and worship. Which by the way, it is the fourth or fifth one in these first couple of chapters in Luke. He praises God for two things:

God’s promise

The Lord had promised Simeon that before he died, he would personally see the Messiah. And as he holds baby Jesus, he begins to praise God and experience a profound peace of soul.

“Depart” — *to set free, to loose*

It was a Greek word that was used to speak of a prisoner's release, to untie a ship and set sail, to take down a tent, and to unyoke a beast of burden. Simeon is simply saying that he was now ready to die, for he had met the Lord's salvation face to face. Only Christ can bring someone such confidence in the face of death.

God's provision

Not only does Simeon praise God for what Christ means to him personally, but notice also how he praises God for the gift of a Savior for the whole world. He recognizes that his own eyes have seen the salvation that God has prepared in the presence of all peoples. The tiny infant that he held in his arms was salvation incarnate, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of God's people.

Keep in mind that this is one of Luke's major themes—the Lord Jesus Christ is not only the means of ethnic Israel's salvation, but He is a Savior for the whole world. It is the same message that was announced to the shepherds:

Luke 2:10-11 — “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

In verse 33, Luke says that Joseph and Mary 'marveled' at what was said about their little Baby. The idea is that they are amazed, astonished, and struck with wonder. It is the same word that Luke will later use to describe the reaction of those who witness the miracle of Jesus. Think about all that Mary and Joseph had already experienced up until this point. Both of them have had an angelic messenger who announced to them news that they would have a Child. Both of them were witnesses of the virgin birth. Both of them heard the story that the shepherds told. Yet they are still filled with wonder at Simeon's words.

When is the last time that you were filled with wonder over the truth of who Jesus is? Has familiarity bred contempt?

G.K. Chesterton — *“We are perishing for lack of wonder, not for lack of wonders.”*

Worship involves wonder. God help us to regain our sense of wonder when we consider the truth of Christ. You will notice that Simeon’s words of praise become words of prophecy. Look at what he says next in verse 34:

“And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.’”

After blessing the two of them, he turns to Mary and has something to say about the future of her Son. Specifically, he says that Jesus will be:

- A stone that many will stumble over

The idea is that He will be both a blessing and a curse to individuals, depending upon how they regard Him. Isaiah the prophet foretold that the Messiah would cause some to fall as a stone of stumbling, while to others He would be a cornerstone of rejoicing.

- A sign that is opposed

He will become the means of judgment for those who refuse to embrace the redemptive plan of God, but He will also be the means of salvation for those who trust in Him.

- A sword that will pierce and reveal

Simeon even foretells the effect that Jesus would have on Mary personally and on the nation as a whole. His death would be like a sword piercing the soul of His mother, but it would divide the nation and separate true believers from unbelievers as He will expose the thoughts of many hearts.

As a righteous eyewitness, Simeon bears witness to God's redemptive purpose. The second eyewitness that Luke mentions is an elderly woman named Anna. Like Simeon, she too was righteous and devout. Notice what is said about her in verse 36:

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

It is very likely that she and Simeon knew each other and worshiped with a faithful group of people who were seeking the One who would come to redeem Israel. After Simeon makes his announcement, Anna also gives prophetic witness that Mary's baby is indeed the long awaited Messiah. She too begins to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. It was yet one more verification of God's redemptive purpose.

In a way that sort of sums up everything in this passage, notice what verses 39-40 say:

“And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.”

What a remarkable thought! The infant soon became a toddler, the toddler became a child, and the child grew to adulthood. He grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and with the favor of God upon His sinless life.

Application:

Be grateful for a legally qualified Savior. Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Law down to the smallest letter. In doing so, He is able to give His righteousness to those who trust in Him for salvation.

Be sure that you are ready when death comes. Simeon was ready because he met Jesus personally. What about you? Countless millions are careening down the highway of life without giving death a passing thought. Don't let it catch you off guard.

Be amazed at the truth of who Jesus Christ is. He is more than a good teacher, a moral person, and an example to follow. He is God in human flesh, the very embodiment of salvation. The truth of who He is ought to provoke wonder in our hearts, just like it did for Joseph and Mary. If you have never been saved, then why not stop right now and invite Christ to be the Savior and Lord of your life? And if you are a Christian, ask the Holy Spirit to take the truth of Christ and renew an awesome sense of wonder within your heart.

So let's revisit the question that was asked earlier:

*What Child is this who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While Shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,*

The Babe, the Son of Mary.

*Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and lamb are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading!
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

*So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of Kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him!
Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby;
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

Who is He? He is none other than God in human flesh, Salvation incarnate,
Hope for the world. Trust Him now!