

Washed and Waiting

Introduction

The Text

²¹And 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.

²²And 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 ²³(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now 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. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷And 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, ²⁸he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:21–32)

The Outline

- A. I have no introduction for us today, save only to say that we shall divide this text up into two looking at: (1) The Life that Comes through Death (vv. 21-24); and (2) The Consolation that Comes through Waiting (vv. 25-32). (I will leave a detailed exposition of the hymn of Simeon for next time.)

(1) The Life that Comes through Death (21-24)

The “Custom” of the Law

- A. Our text begins by bringing us to face the newborn Christ’s relation to the Law, particularly to certain ceremonies or “custom(s) of the law” (v. 27, cf. v. 42).
 - 1. That Luke is trying to draw our attention to this is evidenced by his multiplication of the term “Law (of Moses; of the Lord)” in these few verses (vv. 22, 23, 24, 27; cf. v. 39).
 - a. He wants us to see here that this child and His family are not above the Law but under it and obedient to it as anyone else in Israel.
 - i. This is quite astounding when we consider that Christ Himself is in fact co-author of the Law, with the Father and Holy Spirit! Hence,

we see that the note of humility that was sounded at His incarnation will carry on through His infancy and into the rest of His life (and death).

- B. There are at least three ceremonial elements highlighted in our text. And they appear in this order: (1) The circumcision of a male child (v. 21); (2) The purification of a woman after childbirth (vv. 22a, 24); and (3) The consecration of a firstborn male child to YHWH (vv. 22b-23).

The Principle Stated and Proven

- A. I can't go into too much detail for each of these, but before we investigate, let me first bring out a single principle that I think underlies them all: Life in a fallen world continues only through death.

- 1. Humanity's story should've ended with Adam, the prototypical covenant-breaker. He was told of the forbidden tree: "In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17b). And yet, after breaking covenant with God, while he surely did die (in a spiritual sense), he did not yet totally die (in a physical and eternal sense).

- a. God graciously permits his life, and human life more broadly, to continue. Only now this principle is established: In order for our lives to continue, something else must die in our place. The total death we deserved must fall on another.

- i. Hence, Adam and Eve, are covered with the skins of a sacrifice before they are sent out. Life through death.

- B. With this principle already stated, let's consider now the customs mentioned in our text:

(1) Circumcision (v. 21)

- A. In v. 21, we read that "at the end of eight days...[Jesus] was circumcised."

- B. Circumcision is the cutting off of the foreskin of a male child's reproductive organ. Beginning with Abraham (Gen 17), it served as the mark of the Old Covenant people of God.

- 1. But it did more than this. It reminded Israel of the story. Adam was called to bear fruit, multiply, and fill the earth with God's image, but after the fall the only thing he filled the earth with was the image of the serpent, and death.

- a. God's covenant with Abraham represented Him calling out from the fallen and barren world a people whom He would make alive and make fruitful according to His original plan.

- i. Hence, Abraham and Sarah can produce no children. Their bodies are dead, but God is going to bring new life from them.

- C. Circumcision is the cutting away of the flesh, the old, the dead, the unproductive thing on the male reproductive organ so that a new life principle can emerge.
 - 1. God is going to bring life, but it is now through the mediation of death, cutting off and casting away. Something else was cut off so that His people would not have to be.

(2) Purification (vv. 22a, 24)

- A. In v. 22a, we read that “the time came for their purification...” And then in v. 24 we see that sacrifices are offered for this purification according to the prescriptions in Lev 12.
- B. The reference here is to the ritual uncleanness that a woman enters into just for giving birth (because of the flow of blood among other things). For seven days she would be ceremonially unclean, but then she would have to stay away from the sanctuary of God for another 33 days. Then she could come and offer up a burnt offering and a sin offering for her purification.
- C. What’s the implication of all this? Since the fall, Eve’s pain is multiplied in childbearing (Gen 3:16). It hurts just to be alive. Life is an unclean thing now before God. Even in our bearing fruit and multiplying we are perpetuating sin in some way.
 - 1. “I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psa 51:5).
 - 2. We are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3b).
- D. So this ceremonial uncleanness, this need for purification, is a reminder that we are born in sin, that death accompanies us even as we come into life. And so, even at the moment of birth we need to be covered by the death of a substitute to be clean, to live.

(3) Consecration (vv. 22b-23)

- A. In v. 22b we are told that the Joseph and Mary “brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.” This presentation is then explained in light of what the ESV puts in parentheses “(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) (v. 23). (Luke’s quotation here is not exact but gives the sense of several passages in Exo 13 and Num 18.)
- B. He is referring to the consecration of the firstborn males in Israel (“consecration” meaning: “made holy by giving to God” [ESVSB, 165]). This practice is traced back to the Exodus, where in the tenth plague, the firstborn of all the Egyptian children and livestock were killed but those of the Israelites were spared. A lamb was slain in their place, and the angel of death passed over them.
 - 1. In remembrance of this great redemption, the firstborn males of both animals and men were to be consecrated to the Lord.
 - a. For animals it meant that they would be killed, sacrificed. For men, this meant that the firstborn male must be redeemed. At first these babies

were redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb in their place, but later the redemption was given a price of five shekels (Num 18:16).

- C. The principle God is establishing in all this is plain: You owe your life to death, the death of another in your place.
1. God tells us as much when He explains what the parents are to teach their sons about this ceremony: “¹³ Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.¹⁴ And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem’” (Ex 13:13–15).
 - a. “Remember, son: you owe your life, we all owe our lives to death. The Lamb stood in our place, the blood of the Lamb spoke against the angel of death and we were spared, we were redeemed from the house of slavery and brought into the house of the Lord!”
 2. The last remark in v. 16 indicates the perpetual awareness YHWH wanted His people to have of this principle: “It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.” Keep this always before you!

The Principle Restated and Fulfilled

- A. In all of these ceremonies, then, there has been a reminder of the great underlying principle: I am alive but only through death. I am born in desperate need of salvation. If the dead thing isn't cut off, if the dirty thing isn't made clean, if the enslaved thing isn't redeemed...I will not make it out alive.
- B. And, of course, in our text is the One who has come to fulfill all these ceremonies and the one great principle that underlies them: “^{3b} We...were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal 4:3b–5).
1. You and I were enslaved in sin. We just couldn't get enough of it. Deserving of death. But we would be given redemption, adoption, life, through His death in our place.
 - a. As pictured in the circumcision custom: He would be the dead thing cut off from the land of the living...on that cross, so that in our hearts now there could be a new life principle.
 - b. As pictured in the purification custom: He would be treated as the unclean thing in His flow of blood as He's groaning in childbirth...on that cross, so that we could be born again from above in purity and in holiness.

- c. As pictured in the consecration custom: He would be killed, the firstborn of God slain for us, like the Passover Lamb...on that cross, so that we could be redeemed. Our Exodus passage into life is only because of His deep dark passage into death.

The Principle Applied

- A. The Israelite had such customs, such ceremonies, built into the very fabric of their culture so as to keep this principle ever before them. God was jealous that they not forget they owed their very lives to the death of another, interposed by His grace.
- B. And He's jealous for us here this morning, we who have not the shadows of the Old Covenant but the substance of them in the New.
 1. We might not have to daily deal with the spectrum of cleanness—Jesus has made us clean and holy once and for all; we might not daily need to deal with sacrifices for sin—Jesus was the full and final sacrifice for our sin; but perhaps we should consider our own customs at this point.
 2. Are the customs that define our daily life self-centered or cross-centered? Do we keep the cross before us so that we are always living in light of His death?
 - a. Are we gathering with the saints to pray, and hear, and sing the gospel?
 - b. Do we perceive in the waters of baptism that we owe our new birth to the cold dark grave of His death?
 - c. Do we remember His body broken for us in the breaking of the bread of communion?
 - d. Are we personally searching the Scriptures for fresh glimpses of Calvary in the morning watch of our devotions?
 - e. Are we agonizing with our Savior in Gethsemane in the midnight hour of our prayers?
 - f. In all our thoughts, words, and deeds have we with the apostle Paul: *“decided to know nothing...except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2)?* This is my life: His death!
- C. O it is true that in the gospel God has rolled out for His children a red carpet upon which we now walk in freedom unto glory, coheirs with Christ of the world! But may we never forget why that carpet is red in the first place, it is red with the blood of the Lamb. We owe our lives now and forever to His death!

(2) The Consolation that Comes through Waiting (25-27)

- A. As we continue on in our text we meet a dear saint in the Lord from whom we can learn a lot, Simeon. He's a man *“righteous and devout”*, a man full of the Word and Spirit of God. He's a man who knows how to wait on the Lord. Luke tells us that for his whole life he's been *“waiting for the consolation of Israel” (v. 25)*.

Consolation and Its Waiting Room

A. With the word “consolation” we are dropped into the flow of Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the coming Messianic Servant (beginning in Isa 40).

1. At this point in the book of Isaiah, 8th c. BC Isaiah the prophet, begins to address those whom he foresees will be cast off into exile in 6th c. BC. And here’s his opening line: “¹ Comfort, comfort [console] my people, says your God. ^{2a} Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned...” (Isa 40:1–2a).

B. And from this point on, it’s the consolation of God that permeates Isaiah’s prophecies:

1. “Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted” (Isa 49:13).
2. “For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song” (Isa 51:3).
3. “⁹ Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa 52:9–10).

C. This last verse brings us back full circle into the scene with Simeon in the temple. This consolation is coming to Israel in this child, the Christ.

1. And when Simeon finally lays eyes on Him, he all but repeats the words from Isa 52:10 in the song he sings in Luk 2:29-32: “²⁹ Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”
 - a. Comfort, consolation, salvation, (we could say) life is going to come to Israel and the nations through this child who is the Christ, the Messianic Servant, even the Suffering Servant who will give Himself over to death for our sins!

D. But Simeon had to wait his whole life to see this.

1. We get the sense from the mention of his “death” (v. 26) and “depart(ure)” (v. 29) that Simeon is advanced in years and ready to die. And perhaps it all seemed hopeless, but in the last act, God’s word and Simeon’s waiting prevailed!

You and I in the Waiting Room

A. We must confront ourselves with this question: Am I willing to wait for the consolation of God? Or am I too busy working for a consolation of my own?

- B. This is so hard right?! I remember when I first found God (when God first found me), I was overwhelmed with the sense of His presence in my life, for years. Because of Christ, I'm forgiven, I'm free, I'm alive, I have comfort!
1. But then He started taking me through times of testing, times of waiting, times where all I had were His words. There's no exhilaration, no thrill, no real sense of His comforting presence. We just have His words. And so, by faith, we wait.
- C. Perhaps some in this room are sick of waiting. Perhaps you're all but done waiting for His consolation and your ready to work for your own. If He's not going to save me, I'll save myself.
1. You're ready to bail on the marriage; you're ready to go after the nicer things of the world; perhaps you're even ready to put a gun to your head and work your own consolation that way. Whatever it is, you're ready to stop waiting around for a God you no longer believe is coming.
 - a. O please learn from Simeon on this, and hang on!
- D. Let me close by putting in your hands perhaps the same text that Simeon clung to all those years of waiting. It's no coincidence that *Isa 40*, which begins with the declaration of comfort and consolation, ends with an exhortation to wait for it: “²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”?²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.²⁹ He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;³¹ but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Is 40:27–31).
1. He heard the promise of consolation coming, he heard the exhortation to wait for it, and so he held on to the end: “²⁹ Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation” (vv. 29-30).
 - a. Such will be our story, if only we'd wait!