

Luke 2 (22-38) – The Providence of Christmas

There are a lot of spectacles in the Christmas story. You see angels appearing several times. Stars are guiding people to places far away. Prophecies are coming to life. And there are miracles happening, like the Virgin Birth of Jesus. But there is something else that is sometimes overlooked in the Christmas story. And yet it is every bit as vital to the story, and to history in general, and to your life. And our text today will point you to it.

This part of the Christmas story that we will examine today reveals a foundational truth about who God is and what God does. And it provides one of the lessons you need to learn if you really want to have a robust Christian worldview and a solid Christian walk.

What I am talking about today can change the way you look at life. The way you experience life. The way you can endure and enjoy life. What I am preaching about today is God's providence. It's more than a miracle. It isn't just God breaking into history. It is God superintending all the events of history. Weaving every strand of situation into one garment. Blending every life, every moment, everything all together to accomplish all his purpose.

Maybe you've heard of providence. Maybe you understand some of the theology of providence. Maybe you've noticed when all sorts of things come together in an incredible way. But maybe you've never really considered, or more fully considered, how appreciating providence can affect your life. Your thought life. Your emotional life. Your actions. Your stability in life.

God's providence is related to God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is about his power. God's providence is about the exercise of his power. God has the power to rule everything, and God actively rules over everything. The focus of his rule is down to the minutest detail (Matthew 10:29-30). Nothing happens without God's direction or permission (Acts 2:22-23, 4:27-28). God has a purpose for everything, and he is actively working that purpose in everything (Romans 11:36). Nothing is outside the providence of God.

God is always at work, even when things don't work out as we hope or plan. Someone explained it like this: "There's a wedding that's going to happen somewhere tomorrow and there's a bride who's praying for sunshine, and there's a farmer who's praying for rain". "And if it rains it doesn't mean he doesn't like the bride...He's just up to different stuff at different times." And I'll add this: God is weaving all of that stuff together to accomplish his every purpose. It is amazing to think about all that has to happen for certain things to happen at the same time. And that is what you see in our text today.

It was a time of great spiritual darkness in Israel. And although the Light of God might have seemed dim to many, the Light was still shining. And that Light was shining in the hearts of Simeon and Anna. They faithfully followed that Light for many years. And now, what they had been waiting for was happening. And finally, they saw the Light in the person of Jesus.

Vs.22-24 – This time of purification was about Mary being legally unclean for 40 days after giving birth, as it says in Leviticus 12:2. And on the eighth day after his birth, Jesus would have been circumcised, as it says in Leviticus 12:3 and Luke 2:21. So, after this time, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus left Bethlehem and went back to Jerusalem and the Temple. There they would dedicate Jesus to God, as it says in Exodus 13:2. And the family would offer a sacrifice, as it says in Leviticus 12:6-8. They were devout followers of God. This is why they were at the Temple. And God was providentially orchestrating all the events of Jesus' life. Including the lives of others. Like Simeon.

Vs.25 – Simeon was a good man, a dedicated man. When it says he was waiting for the consolation of Israel, it means that he was waiting on the Messiah to appear. And the Holy Spirit was upon him. And the text shows us how the Holy Spirit was working in Simeon's life. God was arranging the events, the precise timing, and the people involved. It was providence.

Vs.26 – The Holy Spirit was illuminating Simeon's mind. And he knew that before he died, he would see the Christ, the Messiah. Again, the Holy Spirit working is the work of God's providence.

Vs.27 – The Holy Spirit was guiding Simeon. And he came by the Spirit into the Temple, at the same time that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the Temple to be dedicated. Think about this. The Spirit guided Simeon at the exact right time to the exact right place, to the Temple at the very moment when Mary was about to present Jesus to God. It was God's providence.

Vs.28 – Simeon instantly knew that this baby was the Christ. And Joseph and Mary must have been guided to know that Simeon was sent by God to them, to Jesus. They knew Jesus was the Messiah. But now they see that a stranger in the Temple knew it too. It was a providential confirmation of the promises they had been given. And Jesus' parents let Simeon hold the baby Jesus.

Vs.29 – Simeon felt the satisfaction that comes when the Spirit fulfills God's word in your life. The final act of Simeon's story was being fulfilled. For many years, he watched faithfully, and waited patiently, for the appearing of the Christ. Now the savior of God's people was here, in the person of the baby Jesus. Now Simeon could look forward to his own death. God's providence led to Simeon's peace as he experienced God's promise. Amen.

Vs.30-33 – Simeon prophesies. And Simeon prophesies that the Messiah will not only be salvation for Israel, but for the Gentiles too. And Joseph and Mary marveled at what Simeon had said about Jesus. God was not just saving the Jews, but the world. The floodgates of God's mercy had been opened wide. All people could be God's people. God's grace would be revealed to every nation, tribe, and tongue. As the angel said to the shepherds, "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people* (Luke 2:10)." Merry Christmas indeed!

Vs.34-35 – Simeon continues his prophecy. And he gives Mary a foreboding warning. The grace of God that saves souls would be revealed to every nation, tribe, and tongue. But not every person would receive that salvation. Some will rise and some will fall. Jesus is the reason for the season. To some, he will be salvation. To others, he will be a stumbling block. Some will love the darkness and refuse the Light. Jesus is the great dividing line of

humanity. There is no neutral when it comes to Jesus. You will either receive him as Lord and Savior. Or you will not receive him as Lord and Savior. And on this side of eternity, there have been and always will be people who will speak against God by rejecting Jesus the Christ. And of course, Jesus would be crucified, slain for the sin of the world. And Simeon tells Mary she will have heartache, which she didn't yet understand, amidst all this glorious prophecy. But she no doubt would remember it when she saw her son Jesus dying on the cross. In Jesus' day, people either stood up for Jesus or stood up against him. And it is the same today. When it comes to Jesus, when it comes to Christmastime, which stand are you taking?

All of these events, all of this timing, all of these people, and places, past, present, and future. And we see all this mention of the Holy Spirit in Simeon's life, the revelation, the guidance, the prophecies, and we think it is all miracles. But most of it was providence. Simeon didn't have to have some sort of overwhelming feeling or inner voice or obvious miracle. He received that word from God because God wanted him to receive it. He went into the Temple right at the right moment because God wanted him to be right there at the right moment. It wasn't God coming into the moment to move Simeon. God was already moving Simeon and everything else. Hear me clearly. Simeon was a man of prayer, and he had a word, and he stayed faithful, and ready. He didn't need some feeling, or voice, or unmistakable impression to move. He was already moving, walking in step with the Spirit. I think the text, when it says, the Spirit was upon him, testifies to that fact. Yes, the Spirit was guiding him. But Simeon was already following the Spirit's lead. When you are filled with the Spirit, walking in step with the Spirit, it will be the same for you. God's providence will guide you to God's promises.

People do make free decisions. And that is why they are morally responsible for their choices. God is not "making" you make your decisions. You do have free choices. And you are responsible for your choices. But even so, nothing that happens is outside the sovereign will of God. What God sovereignly decrees in eternity people freely choose in time. And you can determine your own choice. But you cannot determine the result of your choice.

God didn't have to get Simeon to move God's way. Simeon was already moving God's way. Vs.25 says that Simeon *was righteous and devout, and the Holy Spirit was upon him*. If you're a Christian, the Holy Spirit indwells you. If you walk in step with the Spirit, following Jesus, you can expect to be led by the Spirit to exactly where he wants you to go. You'll get those miracles if you need them. But the providential path of God will open up to you and you'll find yourself right where God wants you to be. You may not even realize it as it's happening. But you'll look back and say, wow, that was God. Yes, you can pray to God for miracles. But praise God for his providence. And see it again as we look at the story of Anna.

Vs.36-38 – Anna was a prophetess. Her husband died after seven years of marriage. And Anna had been a widow for many years. She was now at least 84 years old. And some scholars say that she might have been a widow for all of those 84 years, and so she could have been more than 100 years old. In any case, she was a widow for many decades. The text says that *she did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day*. This doesn't mean that she never left there. It means that whenever something was going on, night or day, or both, she was there. It's like the person who is there every time the church doors are open. And the Temple was always busy. Her whole life revolved around it. Anna stayed faithful to fast and pray for many decades. Like Simeon, to the end of her life. She was willing to be what God wanted her to be. She trusted in the providence of God, even if others didn't understand. The Bible commends her for this.

But I imagine some people didn't. They probably thought she was mentally challenged. There she is, that old lady, with nothing going on but church. She's there every time the doors are open. Imagine the mocking. What's she praying for? She's got no husband, God's not hearing her. She never eats. What a lonely life. What a tragedy. But those people didn't know what she fed on. It says Anna was a prophetess; she fed on the word of God. Just like Simeon her hope was about waiting on God. And providentially, Anna came right up to where Simeon was with Jesus. It was the answer to her prayers. And she began to confirm all that was being said about Jesus.

Here was this old widow, a nobody, except to God. And she testified to anyone and everyone around her. All those years, a long hard road of providence, but she remained faithful. That is why she recognized God's hand when it moved her to move toward Simeon. Anna was following the Spirit's lead. As she had done for all those decades. God rewards those who diligently seek him. In other words, those who faithfully, continually, consistently seek him, will see him. Like Simeon and Anna. Have faith in God. Keep in step with the Spirit. The cost is worth it. The alternative isn't.

So, how was it that Simeon and Anna could endure all those years, waiting on God? Wouldn't they be out of energy and hope by the time Jesus came? How could they possibly enjoy it? Because they had a word from God. And they put their faith in it. And you do, too. As the Apostle Peter says in 2 Peter 1:19 – *we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.* The birth of the Messiah was prophesied many hundreds of years before it actually happened. In fact, the Messianic hope was spoken of all the way back in the Garden of Eden, to Adam and Eve, after they fell into sin. God's plan, God's power, God's providence. And like Simeon and Anna, we are also waiting on Jesus, living for the Lord, waiting for him to come again, to rescue his people and make all things right. As Titus 2:11-13 says – *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Trusting God's providence by keeping in step with the Holy Spirit will bring you a better perspective, give you peace, increase your patience, and empower you with a passion for God's purpose. God is using you. When you recognize that, you will more readily be obedient to his will, and you will see how God is working all things together for your good and his glory. Sometimes you may need a miracle. But God is always at work. God can keep his promises because of his providence. And he promises to save your soul if you'll repent of your sins and place your faith in Jesus Christ.