

## 04. Luke's Prologue Luke 2:22-52



*“The word of God shall be carried in  
strong hearts and gentle hands”*

## Jesus in the temple : Luke 2:22-24

‘The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple’ (Malachi 3:1).

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 firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord” (Exodus 13:2), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Leviticus 12:8; Numbers 6:10).

The origin of this custom seems to go back to the time when the first-born son was responsible for carrying out the family religious rituals. When the order of Levites was established for this purpose (Numbers 3:12-13), the custom arose of the first-born being still offered to God and then bought back, as it were, by an offering made to the temple (Numbers 18:15-16). Mary and Joseph can afford only the offering of the poor (Leviticus 5:7; 12:8).

## Luke 2:25-28

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the **Holy Spirit** rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the **Holy Spirit** that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the **Spirit**, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God' (Luke 2:25-28).



## Luke 2:29-33



“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. (Luke 2:29-33).

The inspired words spoken by Simeon prepare Luke's readers to see in Jesus the salvation which God has prepared 'in the presence of all peoples'. He is, indeed, as we have been told from the beginning, 'the glory of Israel'. He is also 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (compare Isaiah 42:6). Soon we will hear Luke quoting Isaiah: 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (3:6 = Isaiah 40:5). Luke, the Gentile doctor writing for a largely Gentile church, wants to emphasise this 'catholic' (all-embracing) perspective from the beginning (see also Acts 15:14-18; 28:25-28).

## Origen

‘For a long time I was not holding Christ, for a long time I was not pressing him in my arms. I was locked up and unable to escape from my chains. These words are to be understood not only of Simeon but of the whole human race. If you leave the world, if you go out from the prison and the house of captives to reign, take Jesus in your hands and enclose him in your arms. Grasp him wholly to your breast. Then, exulting, you will be able to go where you desire’(On Luke 15.2).

## John of the Cross Ballad 6

The aged Simeon burned with longing,  
and pleaded with God that he might see this day.  
And so the Holy Spirit answered the good old man,  
and gave him his word that he would not see death  
until he saw Life descending from the heights,  
until he took God himself into his own hands,  
held Him in his arms, and pressed Him to himself.

## Luke 2:34-35

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34-35).

In Mary’s hymn of praise upon meeting Elizabeth (1:46-55) we have been introduced to the reversal that God is going to effect through the Messiah and his herald: the proud will be scattered, the powerful will find themselves brought down and the rich empty. Simeon’s words to Mary declare that God’s judgment applies to the people of Israel and not only to the child who will be ‘**a sign that will be opposed**’ (see 11:27-32). But many in Israel will rise.

Isaiah, too, recognised that salvation, while offered to all, would not be automatically effective for all. God respects our freedom to reject God's love. If we do reject it, we will fail to understand, fail to repent, and so fail to find healing. God's prophet must be prepared for this, as the following text ironically indicates:

And the Lord said, Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed' (Isaiah 6:9-10; quoted in Acts 28:26-27).

The tragedy of human rejection is always present in the real world in which God acts. The good news on which Luke focuses our attention is that God integrates this rejection into his merciful and saving purpose. This is Luke's theme.

On the other hand, perhaps the falling and the rising in this text refer to the same people. The fact that 'falling' comes first, and the fact that for 'rising' Luke uses *anastasis*, a word reserved elsewhere for resurrection from the dead, may indicate that Simeon is referring to those 'many' who will share in Jesus' dying and rising. Luke will stress the need for suffering with Jesus (falling) if we are to rise with him. Mary is warned that this will be true for her.

## Luke 2:36-38

‘There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the **redemption** of Jerusalem’ (Luke 2:36-38).



## Luke 2:39-40

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Luke has modelled his account of Jesus' birth partly on the biblical narrative of the birth of Samuel. We have already noted that the Magnificat closely resembles the prayer of Hannah [Anna], Samuel's mother. The final words of this present scene come from the same tradition: 'Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people' (1Samuel 2:26).

## Jesus, the Son of God Luke 2:41-45

‘Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him.

## Jesus, the Son of God Luke 2:46-47

After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.



## Luke 2:48-50

When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s (first time) affairs?”

But they did not understand what he said to them.

## Luke 2:51-52

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.'



Mary, the perfect disciple, is portrayed here as experiencing the absence of her Son. She and her husband are anxious. They find him 'after three days' in his 'Father's house'. It was on the third day that God revealed from the thick cloud his presence on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:9-11). So it is that Jesus' parents, like all Jesus' disciples, have to search for him in darkness.

John of the Cross expresses this experience beautifully in the first stanza of his Spiritual Canticle:

Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?

You fled like the stag after wounding me.

I went out calling you and you were gone.'

For the third time in this prologue (see 1:9 and 2:22) the scene is set in the temple. He who has been introduced as God's Son (1:32,35) utters his first words, and speaks of God as his 'Father'. Already he has a sense of his mission in which concern for the things of God must take precedence over any other consideration, however sacred.

The words '**I must be about my Father's affairs**' introduce us to an expression '**must**', which Luke uses throughout his work to indicate God's purpose. People, by their obstinate refusal of grace, can fail to be part of this purpose. The purpose itself, however, will ultimately prevail.

Joseph and Mary find Jesus in his '**Father's house**'. Luke uses the temple as a symbol of the community of believers. It is within this community that he wants his readers to find Jesus.

## Concluding comment on Luke's prologue

The prologue sets the stage for the gospel and Acts and functions as an introduction to the major themes that govern the plot of Luke's dramatic narrative. From the beginning it is the Spirit of God who is the main agent in the events that are to have crucial significance for Israel and for the whole world.

*'My eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:30-32).*

It is from God (1:11) that Zechariah learns that his wife has conceived the one who is to herald the long-expected day of the Lord, when all God's promises will be fulfilled (1:20).

It is from God (1:26) that Mary learns that she is to give birth to the Messiah, and we are assured that 'nothing will be impossible with God' (1:37).

Mary is praised because she believed that there would be a 'fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord' (1:45) and she praises God for his faithfulness and his power (1:47-55).

Zechariah's hymn of praise is inspired by the 'Holy Spirit' (1:67) as he, too, gives thanks for what God is doing in our world to demonstrate God's mercy and faithfulness in bringing about the promised redemption and salvation of Israel (1:68-79).

It is from God (2:9) that the shepherds hear of the birth of their Saviour, Messiah and Lord (2:11).

The dominant mood of the prologue is one of ecstatic joy and praise, celebrated within the awe and mystery that accompany the presence and action of God. Luke organises his material with consummate skill and artistic beauty as he presents John and Jesus as belonging together in God's design. He fills his prologue with allusions to the sacred writings of Israel to demonstrate the historical continuity between what is happening through Jesus and the action of God in the history of his chosen people.

Luke and his community knew the experience of failure, and the crucifixion of Jesus himself was the measure of the extent to which people would go in opposing God's grace. Luke prepares us for this, too. Simeon holding the child represents all the hopes of Israel at last finding their fulfilment (2:28), yet, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, he turns to Jesus' mother and warns her:

'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be sign that will be opposed' (2:34).

Luke is preparing us for those characters of his narrative who 'fall': who express our human resistance to grace and who represent the sin in all of us who fail to believe. This resistance will mean that God's purpose was not achieved in the lifetime of John or Jesus, and Luke's community saw this failure, too, in the early post-crucifixion years of the Christian community.

He is preparing us, too, for those characters in the Gospel who welcome Jesus and who are 'raised' to life.

Jesus is committed to God (2:49), just as his mother had been (1:45), and throughout the gospel and the Acts we will find many who continue the remarkable faith and openness to grace that has characterised the main characters of the prologue.

Nothing is impossible to God.

God will fulfil his word and bring about his promised salvation of establishing a Messianic kingdom for Israel, a salvation that will extend to the whole world in spite of and through human rejection .

Throughout the prologue – and it will be the same for the Gospel and the Acts – Luke directs our contemplation to Jesus. Far from presenting us with a small number of incidents to satisfy our curiosity concerning the early years of Jesus' life, Luke has anticipated the gospel in a rich and compelling way by the manner in which he has portrayed Jesus.

He is the saviour (1:31; 2:11), the son of God (1:32,35; 2:49), the son of David (1:32), the Messiah (2:11,26), the Lord (1:43), the one in whom, and through whom, God's promises are fulfilled (1:54), the one who brings peace and joy (2:10,14), the one who is with us (2:7,40,51), the one who brings good news to the poor (2:8), the glory of Israel and the light of the whole world (2:32). We will be judged by the way we have related to him (2:34).

Having introduced the main themes of his work and introduced us to Jesus, Luke is now ready to draw on the traditions of his community to ‘**write an orderly account**’ (1:3) of Jesus’ public ministry: what he did and what he said, how people responded to him, and especially what it is that Jesus revealed about God that continued to inspire Luke and the communities for whom he was writing.