

Christmas 1 / December 29, 2024

Luke 2:34

*“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 to be opposed.’”*

Appointed for the fall and rising of many

On the eighth day of His birth, Jesus was circumcised and given the name Jesus, which means *“The Lord saves.”* On the fortieth day of His birth, Jesus was dedicated to the Lord in the temple in accordance with the law given through Moses, which stated that every first-born male must be dedicated to the Lord. Circumcision was the means by which males were initiated into the covenant the Lord made with Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai. Females were members of the covenant community implicitly by birth through their fathers. Circumcision was and is practiced throughout the ancient near east by the descendants of Abraham upon both male and female. In making covenant with Israel, The Lord commanded only the circumcision of males.

The reason for this is not given. Baptism, which corresponds to circumcision as the sacrament of initiation into the new covenant, is for both male and female. The covenant Moses mediated at Mount Sinai was with only the children of Israel. The covenant Jesus’ mediates is with all people. Perhaps male only circumcision is related to the limited scope of the Mosaic covenant, whereas the covenant Jesus made through the blood of His cross is between God and all people regardless of their racial background. All who believe and are baptized are made members of the covenant of the cross and coheirs of the promises of forgiveness and eternal life that are in Christ Jesus.

Circumcision was practiced only upon males, on the eighth day of birth if they were infants. Dedication of the first born was practiced only on the first-born male on the fortieth day of birth. Dedication of the first-born male was in remembrance of the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, which the Lord accomplished through the death of the first-born of the Egyptians when the angel passed through the land. When the angel saw the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of the Israelite homes he passed over. In remembrance of the deliverance of Israel by the blood of the firstborn of the Egyptians and the protection of the firstborn of Israel by the blood of the Passover lamb, the first-born males were dedicated to the Lord. Jesus was dedicated to the Lord as the firstborn of Mary and as the Lamb who would shed His blood to take away the curse of sin and the condemnation of eternal death from those who believe and are baptized into His name. As Jesus said, *“Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved.”*

Jesus appearance at the temple for dedication on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of His birth was part of His work to fulfill the law in our place. Paul wrote in Galatians, *“But when the fulness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”* In our place Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law, ceremonial and moral, so that He would offer Himself on the cross as the substitute for our sins and as the sacrifice of atonement, to make peace between us and the heavenly Father. Paul wrote in Corinthians, *“God made Him who had no sin to be a sin offering that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”* We receive and become the righteousness of God through faith in His Name and baptism into His death and resurrection.

Jesus’ appearance at the temple for dedication on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of His birth fulfilled ancient prophecy. The faithful in Israel had long been expecting the Messiah, whom we call Christ, to come. In the sixth century before Christ, the Lord spoke through the prophet Malachi saying, *“The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple.”* For centuries the faithful in Israel waited and watched for the Lord to come to His temple. The temple in Jerusalem was an extremely busy place. As busy as a modern shopping centre in the days before and after Christmas. There was a steady stream of worshippers offering sacrifices, parents like Mary and Joseph bringing their first-born sons for dedication. In the throng it was easy to overlook the holy family, most did. Only two people saw the appearing of the Lord and recognized His coming; a man named Simeon and a woman named Anna.

Simeon impelled by the Holy Spirit, rushed up to the holy family, took the child in his arms and cried out, *“Lord now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.”* It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Lord’s Christ, whom the Jews called Messiah. When he saw Jesus, he saw his salvation. Jesus is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who like Simeon, believe. Now realize that this meant that he would soon die, if not in the immediate future it was at least a marker that his time was running out. But rather than an omen of impending doom, it was to him as it should be to us, a sign of his salvation. Everything he had been taught in the scriptures about the Messiah, whom we call Christ, was true. Everything the Holy Spirit had revealed to him about the fulfilment of Malachi’s prophecy was true. The Messiah, whom he previously held in his heart through faith, he now held in his hands. Now he could depart this life in peace, whether the

time was near or far off in the future. Blessed are those who believe the promises of God in their hearts for they will see them fulfilled with their eyes.

Simeon spoke a word of prophecy to the mother and step father of the child. He said, *"This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed."* Looking at Mary in particular he said, *"and a sword will pierce through your own soul also."* Anyone who overheard might have wondered what that strange man was talking about? Mary was probably shocked by the words he addressed to her in particular. What mother wants to be told that her child is appointed as sign of opposition and that her heart will be pierced because of her child? Mr. Good news! But Simeon's words underscored that Jesus was the Messiah and underlined the great battle He had come to wage against human opponents and against the deadliest foes, the devil and eternal death. The devil would fight tooth and nail to preserve his power over the world and the human spirit, which comes through sin and death. Jesus would face fierce opposition, culminating in the great battle of the cross.

Martin Luther once commented after the baptism of a child, that humanly speaking, 'we have done this child no favour, for in baptizing him into the kingdom of Christ we have taken him from the domain of the devil and the devil will do everything in his power to win him back.' Luther was referring to the spiritual struggle every baptized believer must endure as the devil, the world and our own sinful nature seek to turn us from the kingdom of light and return us to the domain of darkness, the devil, sin and death. The devil fought hard against Jesus to prevent Him from fulfilling His purpose as the Christ. He tempted Him in the wilderness. He turned His family against Him. He led His disciples to turn away from Him, one to betray Him and the rest to abandon Him. Jesus stood alone in judgement by the leaders of the church and the world, who both condemned Him to death. The devil saw Him spat upon, beaten, abused verbally and physically and finally crucified. Jesus' mother saw too and as Simeon said, a sword pierced her own soul also.

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul spoke about the spiritual struggle all baptized believers are engaged in, whether we always realize it or not. He said, *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness."* The same powers that sought to sidetrack Jesus from His purpose as the Christ, seek to sidetrack our faith. The spiritual powers of darkness that brought disappointment and heartache to His life, seek to undermine our faith through disappointment and heartache. The ruler of this present darkness who brought Jesus to His cross and death, seeks to use our

crosses to put our faith to death. But Christ was not defeated by death. By death He won the victory over the devil, taking away his control over the spirit by taking away the sin of the world. In baptism Jesus gives us a share in His death to sin and resurrection to eternal life. He gives us victory over the condemnation of death, which the letter to the Hebrews says is the devil's power over the human spirit. Christ gives us His Holy Spirit to empower us to newness of life and to encourage our faith through word and sacrament, so that like Simeon and Anna, we too may wait in hope and believe the Lord's promises until the day we see His promises fulfilled in our eternal salvation.

Simeon said, *"This child is destined for the fall and rising of many."* All who fall at Jesus feet in repentance, He will raise up in forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. God in His mercy, grant this to us all for the sake of Christ Jesus, through faith in His name and baptism into His death and resurrection. Amen