

## Recognizing the Sign

Luke 2:22–40

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<sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

<sup>29</sup> “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,

according to your word;

<sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation

<sup>31</sup> that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup> And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> 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 <sup>35</sup> (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

<sup>36</sup> 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, <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into

Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Sometimes it's difficult to see something when it's right in front of your face. Have you ever stared at one of those 3-D hidden pictures? When you first look at it, it's just a bunch of dots, usually blue and red or maybe some lines on a page that make no sense at all. But as you stare, as your eyes begin to water, as you begin to go cross-eyed, a picture starts to emerge, and it looks as if there's a 3-D image of an elephant or whale right in front of you. Sure, it's covered in blue and red dots, but it looks like the shape of a whale. The image was right in front of you all the time, but it's not easy to recognize.

Even more difficult to recognize sometimes is a sign of what God's doing right in front of you. Nothing wrong with the sign; God's put it right there. And at this joyous time of the year, we can surely guess what the chief sign is.

The sign we need is right there in front of us: [IMM] Immanuel, God with Us. The problem is, by our own understanding, we can't recognize what that sign means for us. What's more, when folks do see it, many don't want to.

Being able to see what God's doing and how he fulfills his promises isn't an easy thing, but, then again, God's Word teaches us that it's not really dependent on us. You don't have to go cross-eyed in order to see it. This recognition happens through and because of God's Holy Spirit.

Simeon, the man in our text, had been given the promise of seeing the Christ before he died. Now, I know it's really easy to get caught up right there and think, “Wow, God, why don't you give ME that promise? Wouldn't it be great to see Jesus coming again just like Simeon saw Jesus the first time around before he died?” Well, don't get caught up there, because this wasn't a blanket kind of promise to God's people; this was a very specific promise to one individual in time. Simeon alone was given this promise of seeing the Christ in the person of Jesus before he died, and God fulfilled his promise. But the thing to note here is that Simeon recognized it: “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. 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 . . .”.

The reason Simeon recognized this sign that God was fulfilling in Jesus was because he “came in the Spirit.” In some way, Simeon was connected with the Holy Spirit. He was described in v 25 as “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”

Is that where you are? Do you have the Holy Spirit? Yes! In Christ, we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, to be our Comforter, to be our Counselor, to be our Paraclete—the One who walks with us daily. When you were baptized, God gave you his Holy Spirit. Every time you hear the Word of Christ proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is active, working in your heart, opening your eyes. At the Lord's Table, it's the Holy Spirit who assures you Christ's body and blood really do give you forgiveness and eternal life. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit because of Jesus' promise and gift to us.

Simeon didn't have the Holy Spirit because he was righteous and devout. But Simeon was righteous and devout because he had the Holy Spirit. Simeon responded to the Holy Spirit's presence through a life of listening, responding, and recognizing God's works through the Holy Spirit. He listened to God's Word, listened to what the Holy Spirit revealed to him through the Scriptures, and listened to the Holy Spirit as it moved him to go to the temple that day. He responded to the Holy Spirit's prompting by going and doing what the Spirit said. And he recognized what God was doing because the Holy Spirit revealed it to him.

So here's what he 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.”

The Spirit revealed his action and work in Jesus Christ to Simeon, which opened his eyes and his heart, allowing him to respond in faithfulness,

obedience, and devotion. That's an important distinction. It's God's work and action that always comes before our response. God has revealed this sign of Jesus to us, his Spirit has worked this faith in us, and we respond with thanks and praise in a way similar to Simeon.

But sometimes God's action doesn't evoke such a positive response. Where Simeon responds with this amazing praise to God, so that even Mary and Joseph marvel, Simeon points out that Jesus is salvation to some but can also be a stumbling block.

The apostle Paul later saw this as well—that Jesus is the source of salvation, but some would respond like Simeon, while others would not. “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16). That's the Pauls and Simeons.

Always some will believe, and some won't—even when the same sign from God is right there in front of them.

When some see this sign from God, Jesus Christ in the flesh, Jesus Christ crucified, Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead, some will respond with disbelief, disgust, skepticism, and insults. You and I might not get why some people have these hang-ups after hearing what God has done for them. Maybe it's in our message. Maybe we're confusing Law and Gospel or presenting the Gospel in a way that isn't believable. Maybe we're not responding with that same conviction Simeon had that would make others believe what we say, because we might not believe it ourselves. But no matter what the cause is, the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection are stumbling blocks to people. And it's largely because it makes us pause and take a look at our own sin.

When we see such a great work that God has done for us, we come to realize that we can't save ourselves. It's God's work and action that does this. It takes the control out of our hands. It brings us to a point where we have to admit that we can't do it, we can't save ourselves, and we stand in need of God. We get to a point of dependence on him, and it hurts a little. It's not easy to admit that you're wrong or that you need someone else, especially God.

That was Simeon's point! You don't have to do

this on your own. It's okay to be dependent on God. That's how he designed it all along. Even in the Garden of Eden when everything was perfect, it was perfect because Adam and Eve rested in God and relied on him to provide and take care of them. It's once they turned toward themselves, thinking that they could find wisdom in their own thoughts and knowledge, that things got all messed up. But the Gospel, the message that Simeon proclaimed, pointed back to God's salvation and work in Jesus. Not only did Adam and Eve's salvation come in Jesus, but their daily sustenance, their daily needs, their daily leading, counseling, consolation, and redemption came from Jesus through his Holy Spirit.

It's easy to get caught up in searching for signs and looking for God to give us explicit instructions in what to do next, what job to take, what girl or guy to date and marry, and how we're going to get through the next month or week financially. But in all these things God is giving us this assurance that he is here providing for us daily. We need not look to anywhere or anyone else for this. So rest in him. Know that you do have the Holy Spirit so that you can recognize what God is doing right in front of you. See that the sign you need more than anything has already been given and fulfilled in Immanuel, God with us. Hear his calling and his prompting, and respond to his goodness by resting and being dependent on him. Amen.

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