

“Simeon, Who Saw God’s Salvation”

The Gospel of Luke 2:25–35

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Luke 2:25–35 (PowerPoint)

Preface

This scene is an event that took place not very long after Jesus was born.

In Israel, when eight days have passed after a child is born, the child is to be circumcised, and Jesus also went to the temple of God in order to keep that custom.

There, a man named Simeon—who had been told by the Holy Spirit and had received a promise that he would “see the Messiah”—saw Jesus, met the infant Jesus, and sang a song of joyful praise.

At the time when Jesus was born, Israel, for a very long time, had been waiting and longing for the coming of the Messiah as a whole nation.

However, even though the Messiah actually came, no one was able to recognize that the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, had come, nor did they rejoice.

As we know, Jesus was born in a certain stable in Bethlehem, and the only ones who came to worship Jesus were the Magi from the East, who had come from a place far removed from Israel, and the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks at night while living outdoors.

Furthermore, King Herod tried to kill the infant Jesus.

And during Jesus’ public ministry, those who aimed at His life and put Jesus to death on the cross were the very religious leaders who never ceased longing for the Messiah and who taught and instructed the people of Israel about the coming of the Messiah.

The question is, “Why do such ironic things—such irony—happen?”

“Why were they unable to encounter Jesus, whom they had waited for so eagerly?”

“Why is it that even though they see, they do not understand; even though they hear, they do not understand; even though they touch, they do not understand?”

Part One

Christmas, in our society as well, has become something like an annual event that brings the year to a close, but in the church, needless to say, it is also a great and important season.

I was not raised in a Christian home, but when I was in elementary school, somehow, when Christmas came, my heart would feel excited, and I would look forward to it as a day when I could receive—or at least expect—a present in addition to my birthday.

I remember riding the train together with my younger sister, going one stop to Nishi-Arai Station, buying a Christmas cake at a supermarket called Nichii, and then the two of us going to the toy section to look at the toys we wanted to beg for.

After becoming a Christian, mistaken ideas such as Christmas being a day to receive presents or a day to go on a date with one's sweetheart disappeared, and it became simply a day to rejoice in the birth of Jesus.

I also remember fondly the love feasts that we used to have once a year after the Christmas worship service, the Christmas dance festival held during the evening open worship service, and the Christmas groove that we prepared together with the young people.

After attending the Christmas Eve candle service on the 24th, we sang Christmas carols together with the caroling group under the cold night sky.

And then there were the warm and delicious meals at the homes of those who invited the caroling group. Christmas after becoming a Christian became a time overflowing with gratitude and joy that was, in meaning, completely different from Christmas before that.

It is certainly enjoyable.

Christmas celebrated with an understanding of its true meaning was clearly different from a Christmas that simply drifts along in a vaguely festive atmosphere and passes by without much thought.

There is gratitude, and there is joy.

But when we spend a whole month every year in what is called Advent, the season of waiting, somehow it ends all too easily, or I begin to wonder whether this alone truly constitutes Christmas.

I sometimes feel there is a danger that Christmas may become something we simply get through, something that just passes by without much thought.

Why is that?

Perhaps the biggest reason is that in the way we enjoy Christmas, in the way we celebrate it, and in the way we understand Christmas, we may not be faith-centered at the most basic and most important point.

The question is whether we have a perspective and an attitude like that of Simeon.

Part Two

The Jews two thousand years ago were all waiting for the Messiah as a deliverer who would solve external problems, surface problems, and the various problems that arose in daily life.

From their point of view (I should not say “when Jesus comes”), they thought, “If the Messiah comes, we will be freed from Roman oppression, punishment will be brought upon all the surrounding nations that persecuted Israel, and the political and military glory that existed in the days of the old Davidic kingdom will be restored.”

If we apply this to our lives today, it would mean that they were expecting a situation and conditions in which all difficulties—economic hardship, physical and mental illness, or problems related to one’s environment and circumstances—would be resolved, leaving no worries, no anxieties, and only joy.

Of course, Jesus did come as the Messiah, and He came in order to resolve all the problems of humanity. But the reason He did not perfectly match what they expected lies in the fact that they overlooked—failed to notice—that the first key to solving all problems is the resolution of sin, that is, the resolution of our human sin.

Therefore, as we approach this Christmas, regardless of what kinds of presents we expect or what kinds of happy things we are hoping for, the greatest, most important, and core matter in welcoming Christmas is this: that we ourselves remember that we are, more than anyone else, deeply entrenched, long-seasoned sinners.

And as we fight against sin—against wickedness, transgressions, and sinful hearts—trying to drive them out and resisting even to the point of shedding blood, then, like Simeon, by seeing salvation in the infant Jesus, seeing the light of revelation, and seeing glory, we may be able to give thanks, rejoice, and spend a truly meaningful Christmas.

Part Three

We often, almost without realizing it, reflect on the birth of the Lord Jesus with thoughts such as, “Jesus came for me, for me, for me,” thoughts that are self-centered, selfish, self-indulgent, sentimental, and focused only on our own healing. Yet the Jesus Himself who was born came to this earth with an intention that clearly draws a line from such “for me, for me, for me” thinking, and He told us to follow Him in that way.

When we turn to Deuteronomy chapter 10 in the Old Testament, after the Lord God rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, we find that there is something He commanded them again and again, repeatedly, many times over.

Deuteronomy 10:12–22 (PowerPoint)

It is this: “Keep the commandments of the LORD your God for your own good.”

What is true happiness for a human being?

What is true blessing for humanity?

It is to follow the will of the Lord God—but then, what kind of God is this God?

He is the One who does not judge by outward appearance, who shows no partiality, who takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, who loves the sojourner, and gives him food and clothing.

He is the complete opposite of what is popularly talked about today as “Japanese First.”

He is a compassionate God.

He is a God who bestows grace, a God who shows mercy, and a God who mobilizes all that He is for the happiness of all people.

He is not a God who harms others for His own sake, nor a God who builds His own glory upon the suffering of others.

He is the true God.

Why is the Lord God—why is only the God of the Bible—worthy to receive praise?

Because He is the true God, and because He alone is God.

When we look at Greek mythology, we see gods created by human beings who may have more power than humans, but whose hearts are no different from human hearts—narrow, self-centered, and capricious.

The gods created by human beings, other than the God of the Bible whom we believe in, were made in the same way humans projected their own image onto them; therefore, in content, they are exactly the same as humans.

They are called gods, and yet they are not godlike at all.

Just as the Psalms say.

Psalm 115:4–8 (PowerPoint)

“Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.”

In 1 Corinthians 10:20, the apostle Paul says that those gods wrung out by human hands are demons, the work of evil spirits who cause people to make false gods, and that those who associate with such false gods are associating with demons.

Using the expression “godlike” may sound irreverent, but because we live in a world overrun with false gods, I dare to use it: a truly godlike god must not only possess power, but must also draw forth from us humans a willing, voluntary conviction—a surrender, a yielding—so that we willingly and gladly kneel before Him and raise a white flag full of hope.

The one true God taught by the Bible, whom we believe in, is precisely such a God.

Even if, because of our human shortsightedness, we do not understand at the present moment, when we look back later, His ways will draw out our conviction, our surrender, and our white flag; and we will kneel before Him willingly, filled with hope.

Through His gracious, unfathomable, and unsearchable wisdom and guidance, and through His mercy, He grants us a blessed and complete surrender.

The depth of that grace and mercy is so vast, so generous, so patient, that it cannot be contained by anything in all creation.

In 1 Corinthians 13, the chapter of love, the very first word used to describe love is, “Love is patient.”

That is, “God is love,” and the God who is love is a patient God.

And among the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians, there is also “patience.”

That is, God, who is Spirit, is a generous and patient God.

Part Four

Then what is Christmas—the celebration of such a God taking on human form and being born as an infant?

The one and only Lord God did not reveal His glory by punishing us, dragging us into calamity and judgment, or forcing us to acknowledge Him through fear, disaster, and condemnation. Rather, in order to rescue us from despair, hardship, and sorrow, the very God who created all things came Himself into our midst, bore our troubles, sufferings, and weaknesses, became a substitute for our sins, and revealed His glory through the grace and salvation He bestowed upon us.

And is this not the most important posture required of us as we welcome Christmas?

It is when we care for our neighbors, share by sacrificing what is ours, and look upon those who are in hardship that Christmas truly shines.

It is because Jesus was like this that the Bible describes Him as “the true Light, which gives light to everyone.”

If we rejoice and enjoy Christmas only among ourselves, only within our own families, then we may be acting contrary to the meaning, intention, and will that God embodied, expressed, and poured into Christmas.

If we follow the principle to its end, then when we who have offered Christmas worship leave this sanctuary, we would take off and let go of everything—from the clothes we

are wearing to our most treasured possessions—and allow them to be used to become warmth for someone else, to be used to share and comfort someone else’s pain. That, I believe, is the meaning of Christmas.

And if we cannot do that, if we wish to refuse and decline, then before God we may become people who care only about ourselves—people who devour the flesh and blood of the infant Messiah Jesus who gave everything, wipe our mouths elegantly with a napkin, and walk away with a face as if nothing happened; believers who do not give the slightest thought to the will of Jesus, or perhaps spiritual thieves.

A professor who was my instructor at seminary once said, “Hong, perhaps the church has produced many Christians who are like vampires, who do nothing but suck, suck, suck the blood of Jesus. You and I must first recognize that we ourselves are indeed such Christians. And yet, let us become Christians who know and express the will of Jesus.”

These are unforgettable words—words that straighten one’s posture and say, “This is how it must be.”

Part Five

Every year, year after year, we spend the season of Christmas.

Of course, it is a joyful and wonderful time, but has it not perhaps passed by surprisingly easily, even emptily?

If that is the case, it may be because it does not fully align with, or coincide with, the meaning, intention, and will of Jesus’ coming.

Perhaps we feel poor because we ask, “Why are there no presents? Why is there so little left in my hands? Why are we not given something worldly and solid to rely on as we live in this world?”

And this is so, even though, because of the redemption of Jesus Christ, we have been made children of God and are in reality rich, having been given hearts that are content.

Do we feel, “It is regrettable, I cannot accept this, it is frustrating, it is unbearable”?

Do we feel, “Even if I believe in Jesus, there is no guarantee”?

If so, then it means that what Simeon spoke, guided by the Holy Spirit, to Joseph and Mary—who were holding the infant Jesus in their arms—is happening within us.

The Gospel of Luke 2:35 (PowerPoint)

“So that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

Before Jesus, who emptied Himself of everything that belonged to being God, many people have the greed in their hearts revealed, their selfishness revealed, their self-centered thoughts revealed. Seeking only their own healing, their lack of love and lack of patience are revealed. Contrary to the will of God, they feel frustration toward the infant Jesus, sense that He is “someone who has nothing, someone useless,” perceive only powerlessness and shabbiness that seem to solve nothing, and are unable—unlike Simeon—to see God’s salvation in the infant Jesus, to see the light of revelation that illuminates people, and to see the glory of God.

Then, can we who are gathered at this Christmas worship see, in the same way as Simeon, salvation, the light of revelation, and glory in the infant Jesus who is held in the arms of poor, fallen parents who were once of royal lineage?

True Christmas is when we break free from selfish hearts stained by sin, from personal greed, and from the bad habit of thinking only of ourselves, and make this day something greater—when we embody, with our very lives, the fact that the Lord came for us, rescued us from sin, and delivered us from self-centeredness, grasping, impurity, and emptiness. Only then, I believe, does Christmas truly become a day of joy for us.

Otherwise, there is a danger that lighting the Christmas tree, holding joyful gatherings, and even singing hymns will amount to nothing more than an internal party for ourselves.

A light that does not shine into darkness has no value as light, and salt that is not scattered where there is decay has no value as salt.

Christmas, too, is a time when we strive to embody the words of Jesus, “You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth.”

Conclusion

It is not too late yet.

Before this year passes, may we look around us and, in obedience to the will of the Father God—who, long before we recognized any need, long before we asked anything of Him, and while we were still sinners, sent His only Son, caused Him to be born in a stable, and put Him to death on the cross for us—remember the joyful, glory-filled content of the salvation that the cross has given us as children of God, and may this be a Christmas in which we express, through our way of living, what it means to be Christians.

At that time, I believe we will be able to say more deeply and truly, “Merry Christmas,” and “We give thanks for Christmas.”

I do not know with what expectations or thoughts each one of us is here today, but when we leave this sanctuary, may we remember this Word: the Jesus whom Simeon understood, and whom King Herod, the chief priests, and all the Jewish people could not understand.

May we clearly recognize that difference, and as those clothed with grace, as those clothed with power, as Christians who believe in Christ, may we not give up walking out the Christian life. May we be victors in Christ who do not give up responding and acting in ways that are fitting to the will of God.

Let us pray.

Benediction: Deuteronomy 10:17–19