

## “Nunc Dimittis” – Luke 2:22-35

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com)]*

Take a Bible and let's meet in Luke 2...

Today we will complete this sermon series. The goal of the series has been to journey through the Christmas story with Luke, reflecting on the original Christmas carols that he records for us. We have examined three. Today we will examine the fourth and final. Last week we set the stage for this scene by examining the opening verses. For the sake of context, I'd like to read those verses again and then venture on into the next scene of the story. I invite you to follow along as I read, beginning in verse 22. This is God's Word...

*“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.’” (Luke 2:22-35)*

Since we already considered verses 22 through 24 last week, we are going to pick things up today with Simeon. Verse 25 tells us that he was in Jerusalem when Jesus' family arrived in Jerusalem. We are told that Simeon was “*righteous and devout*,” waiting on Israel's hope, and touched by the Spirit of God. The Spirit revealed to Him that he would not die before He had laid eyes on the Christ. So he waited and waited until one day the Spirit impressed upon him to go to the temple. And it was there that he at last came face to face with “*the Lord's Christ*.”

If you or your spouse has every had a child by birth, you know that people tend to say a lot of the same things when they come to see you and the baby for the first time. Usually it has something to do with the baby's appearance. “Oh, look at those chubby cheeks!” “She has her mother's eyes.” “He's the spitting image of his dad.” “Can you believe all the hair he has already?” Every parent hears a revolving door of these comments. Why? Because they are safe. People don't really know what to say in those moments, especially guys. But Simeon knew exactly what he would say when he met the Christ. He was ready. He speaks (or sings) a prayer of dedication when he first gets to hold the newborn Jesus. It's a song of salvation.

*“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.” (Luke 2:29-32)*

## A Song of Salvation

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to hear these words? Imagine the elation they felt when Simeon cried his tears of joy and relief. It was a joyous moment. An unexpected moment. A moment they would not soon forget. The text says that they “*marveled at what was said about him*” (2:33).

We should too as it turns out. Simeon is announcing hope for people like us. God would usher salvation into the world through this child, but Simeon is quick to clarify that this salvation will not be limited to the nation of Israel. It will be for the nations. The “*Gentiles*” as they are called in verse 32. The non-Israelites, in other words. People like you and me. Americans and Mexicans and Rwandans and Ugandans and Indonesians and every other people group around the world who were outsiders to God’s covenant with Israel. Jesus’ salvation extends to every hemisphere and touches people from every tribe, nation, and tongue (at least it will one day). Simeon helps us to see the global implications of the Gospel. And this is good news for people like us. “Jesus has come to dispel the darkness, to shine the light of salvation into every dark corner of every dim heart.”<sup>1</sup> The offer of salvation extends to us too, not just Israel. This is Simeon’s song. And, I think we all can agree, it’s a good one!

But it had extra significance to Simeon because, as I mentioned, God had assured him that he would not die until he finally encountered the Savior. He had waited and waited for God to fulfill that promise. He was like a sleepless child on Christmas Eve, chomping at the bit trying to hasten the morning so he can finally get his hands on that gift he has been longing for. Who knows how many times he came into the temple courts or wandered through the streets of Jerusalem wondering, “Could this be the day!” Every parent who brought a child to the temple for dedication must have filled him with anticipation as he patiently watched and waited for the fulfillment of God’s promise to him. And, friends, this is what it means to be a Christian—faithfully waiting for God to do what He has promised.<sup>2</sup>

Then the day finally arrived. He had finally encountered his glorious hope. He had seen Jesus and therefore he had seen the salvation of God. “Of course”, as Phil Ryken reminds us,

“...neither Simeon nor anyone else is saved simply by the birth of Jesus. Jesus still had to live a perfect life, die an atoning death, and rise to eternal glory. There is no salvation without the cross and the empty tomb. But already at this point Simeon could see that salvation had come in the person of Jesus Christ, and therefore that God would do everything else to save him. The child in his arms was not simply part of his salvation, but salvation itself. Jesus is all that anyone needs to be saved.”<sup>3</sup>

So when Simeon holds Jesus close to his racing heart, he cries out, “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word*” (2:29). This is where the title for Luke’s fourth and final Christmas carol comes. The Latin title is *Nunc dimittis*, which means “now you are dismissing” or, simply, “now dismissed.” God is dismissing Simeon from his watch. The wait is over. The consolation of Israel and the nations has arrived. So Simeon says, in essence, “Lord, you can take me now. My work is done. You kept your word.”<sup>4</sup> He’s ready to die. He can rest in peace. He’s ready to be released from his watch post. Some people infer from Simeon’s words that he was an older man, clinging to life. Luke doesn’t really say that, but it is quite possible.<sup>5</sup> In any case, Simeon is ready for his final departure having seen Jesus.

“This was partly because of the special promise that he would not see death until he had seen the Christ. But the principle also has a wider application. *Anyone* who has seen Jesus with the eyes of faith is prepared to die. And anyone who has not seen him—whether young or old—is not ready to die at all. When we see Jesus and his salvation we are ready to be dismissed from this life in peace and enter the life to come.”<sup>6</sup>

The question then becomes: have you looked upon Jesus with the eye of faith? Have you seen Him as pierced for your sins? Have you seen Him as raised for your salvation? Have you trusted that He is your only hope in

life and death? Only when the answer to each of these questions is a heartfelt “yes” and “amen” are we really made ready for our appointment with death. Are you ready? Simeon was. You can be too, if you would turn from your sin and trust Christ alone to save you. You can have the peace of Simeon through faith in Jesus Christ. I assure you, there is nothing sweeter.

But the sweetness of that hope is tied to the bitterness of Christ’s affliction. This is why Simeon has more to say in this text. Perhaps you wished the text had stopped at verse 33, with the child’s parents marveling at God’s purposes for their boy. But alas Simeon continues. He looks into young Mary’s eyes and says, “*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*” (2:34-35). Talk about the winds being let out of your sails. How deflating. Simeon’s song of salvation turned to a word of woe...

### A Word of Woe

This child, Simeon says, will lead some to rise and some to fall. He would reveal people thoughts and attitudes toward God. As a light, He will expose people’s hearts. And what exists in the fallen heart is not pretty. Ever. When their hearts are laid bare, some respond with humility and brokenness over their sin. They see their need for God’s grace. They recognize Jesus as the only Savior. They are drawn to Him and find life. They are raised to glory. Indeed, the word translated “*rising*” is used elsewhere in the New Testament for “resurrection.” Everyone who believes in Jesus will share in His glorious resurrection life. He was appointed for our rising.

But not everyone will know such life. Many people do not react well to being exposed. They resist Christ in their pride. They are offended at the idea that they need saving or that salvation only comes through Jesus Christ. They convince themselves that they don’t need Jesus because He will just get in the way of the life they want. They ignore His invitation. They do their own thing. And in their own way they oppose Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes this happens in subtle ways. Sometimes in more public ways.

“This explains why some of our family members scorn our commitment to Christ. It explains why there is so much resistance to Christian truth on the secular college campus. It explains why other religions are all united in their opposition to Christianity... When people are opposed to Christians it is because they are opposed to Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

But opposition is the gamble we all are playing at until we submit to Christ. Most will never abandon this posture. It is a settled state. So Mary is warned that her baby will be opposed. His purpose and person will divide people before God. His cross will draw a line in the sand. Which side one lands on will determine whether they inherit from God salvation or condemnation. But there are no innocent bystanders. There are no neutral parties. None. And that is true today as well. As one author reminds us,

“Jesus still exposes hearts and provokes opposition. Perhaps you don’t know what you think about Jesus. Maybe you’re aware of your slight opposition to him, but you don’t really know where it comes from or how it got there. It could have gotten there by any number of things you’ve been taught over the years. But the ultimate source of that opposition is your sin nature. You were born that way. All of us were. In our sin we have this opposition to Christ, to his claim on our lives, to his lordship and deity. And so we rebel. But that rebellion will be put down. God will not always strive with us in our sin. If we continue in it, we will fall—or, rather, be pulled down by God.”<sup>9</sup>

That’s what Simeon was getting at when he predicts that Jesus was “*appointed for the fall and rising of many*” (2:34). He came to save, but He will also judge. He will lift us up or trip us up. So are you for Him or against Him? Will you rise or will you fall? This is a matter of life and death. And it comes down to faith and unbelief. We must choose wisely “because what God will do with us for all eternity depends on what we do with Jesus right now.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the greatest inventions associated with the modern celebrations of Christmas is the emergence of the gift receipt. You may not admit it, but we all opened up some present, thought “I would never wear this,” faked a smile and word of gratitude, only to have a flood of relief wash over us when we discover that the box contains more than a hideous sweater. It contains a gift receipt. Sometimes the most exciting thing about a gift is the gift receipt. Why? Because we know when we possess a gift receipt we can just exchange the thing that crazy aunt gave us for something we actually want. And there’s nothing wrong with that.

But the true gift of Christmas is and has always been Jesus Christ. We give gifts to remind ourselves of the gift that God the Father gave to us when He sent His Son for our salvation. He is the Gift. And God’s Gift to us at Christmas did not come with a gift receipt.<sup>11</sup> You can either receive Him or reject Him, but you can’t send Him back! He is the hope that is offered and there is no other gift coming, no other hope to exchange Him for. There’s just a decision—submission or opposition.

In time Mary would come to witness the growing opposition aimed at her child. It would be violent. It would be, quite literally, piercing. And it would be so piercing that it would penetrate her heart as well. Did you catch that parenthetical statement in verse 35. Simeon tells Mary, “*a sword will pierce through your soul also*”. He doesn’t tell her what will happen. He just tells her how it will feel when the time came that she would witness the climax of violent opposition levied against her son. She would have to endure her baby boy being arrested, tried, sentenced unjustly to die, beaten within an inch of life, pierced through with nails, and hoisted up on a wooden cross to the celebration of gathered onlookers. “As an adult the one who had lain in the devout Simeon’s cradling arms was hung from a cruel Roman cross.”<sup>12</sup> And when Mary finally found herself at the foot of that cross, her soul was pierced as sharply as Jesus’ side.

The Christmas story is connected to the Easter story. You can’t understand one without the other. “The wooden food trough led to the wooden cross”.<sup>13</sup> The crucifixion was not an unexpected development in the plot of salvation history. It was the fulfillment of a divinely authored and pre-ordained plan. Fast-forward three decades in history and this, according to Luke, is what transpired:

*“Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.”<sup>33</sup> And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.<sup>34</sup> And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments.<sup>35</sup> And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!’<sup>36</sup> The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine<sup>37</sup> and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’<sup>38</sup> There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!’<sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’<sup>41</sup> And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.’<sup>42</sup> And he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’<sup>43</sup> And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’<sup>44</sup> It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour,<sup>45</sup> while the sun’s light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.<sup>46</sup> Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.<sup>47</sup> Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’” (Luke 23:32-47)*

I want you to notice four things from these verses. We will have to be brief. Here’s the first one...

### *In Death He Was Reduced to Nothing*

Verse 34 tells us that they cast lots for His clothing. In other words, they gambled over His clothing. He didn't need them anymore after all.

If you have ever been a resident of prison or a hospital, then you know that there comes a point where you have to relinquish your clothing. When you put on that jumpsuit or that robe, you're left with a sense that you are no longer in control. The hope is that one day when your sentence is served or your operation is complete, you will be reunited with your clothing. If someone else walks away in possession of your clothing, then things didn't pan out the way you had hoped. Jesus would not be getting His clothes back. As Alistair Begg writes,

“The point here is that he is left with nothing; he is reduced to nothing. This man's birth had been announced by angels. In between his birth and death, he had commanded storms, multiplied meals for one into banquets for thousands, re-started a dead girl's life, stood up to those who used religion as a veneer for their own desires for power or wealth, and offered compassion to those broken in their bodies or by their mistakes. Now Jesus is nothing, and has nothing... Jesus is plumbing the depths. Naked, vulnerable, and mocked...”<sup>14</sup>

And why? Did something go wrong? No. This was the plan. Simeon was preparing Mary for it. Though what mother would ever be prepared for that. But the point is that events are unfolding according to plan. Christ is reduced to nothing, so that we would not have to be. So that we could rise and not fall.

Next, notice...

### *In Death He Fell Victim to Divine Wrath*

Verse 44 tells us that when Jesus was executed darkness fell over all the land. We don't expect darkness during the day. That's unusual. But it's not unprecedented. What we need to understand though is that, in the Bible, “darkness during the day is a signal of God's displeasure and God's judgment.”<sup>15</sup> One example of this is during the Exodus from Egypt. When God rescued His people from their bondage, He did it in a way that foreshadowed the ultimate redemption He would achieve through Christ.

“The last plague was the judgment of God, and it came to everyone in Egypt—whether Egyptian or a member of Israel—because everyone had sinned. So in each house, the firstborn son died, unless a lamb had died in that home. But the second-last plague was a plague of darkness. ‘Total darkness covered all Egypt for three days’ (Exodus 10 v 22). That darkness was an indication of impending judgment. That darkness said to everyone in Egypt that God's punishment was falling—that the punishment of death and separation from him, the punishment deserved by sinners who have lived in rejection of him, was coming.”<sup>16</sup>

The same darkness fell over Israel again on the day that Christ was crucified. In this case, however, only one firstborn Son “*breathed his last*” (Luke 23:46). God's judgment had come in all its fury. Only it fell upon Jesus, our Substitute, our Passover Lamb. “Here we see God's Son, punished as a sinner by his Father, even though he had never, ever sinned... He was experiencing hell.”<sup>17</sup> He was paying the price for our sin. He was experiencing the wrath of God we deserved for our rebellion against God. He was going through hell to save His people from hell. We deserved to hang on the cross as objects of God's wrath. He took our place. Our sin deserved to be punished gruesomely. Jesus absorbed all that condemnation. Now, in Christ, there's no condemnation left (Romans 8:1). Hallelujah! What a Savior! And this leads us to a third observation...

### *In Death He Gave Sinners Access to God*

Back in Luke 23, we are told in verse 45 tells us that “*the curtain of the temple was torn in two*” when Jesus hung on the cross. Matthew’s tells us that it was torn “*from top to bottom*” (Matthew 27:51). This is a curtain that is taller than this sanctuary, at least an inch thick of material, and would have taken dozens (if not hundreds) of men even to lift. And even if men could have ripped it in two, they would not have been able to rip it from top to bottom. The only explanation is that God ripped it asunder. “As Jesus died on the cross, an act of divine vandalism took place only yards from where he had once lain in Simeon’s arms.”<sup>18</sup>

But why is that significant? Because the curtain was a visual reminder of the people’s separation from God. Sinners were not aloud to enter into His presence. The curtain therefore shielded the people from the place in the temple where God’s presence was said to dwell. We long to be with God, but sin creates separation. Take away sin and there is no longer a need for separation. Since Christ’s death is the means God uses to remove our sin and cleanse our hearts, the curtain of separation is torn as a picture of our redemption through the cross of Christ. His death is our atonement. His suffering has made possible our access. The veil is torn. And it was torn by none other than God Himself! This is the good news. This is the Gospel.

Finally...

### *In Death He Divided More Than a Curtain*

Remember what Simeon said to Mary: “*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed...so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*” (Luke 2:34-35). This very demarcation is on full display at the cross. Two criminals are crucified at His sides. One mocks Him; one begs for mercy. One is condemned; one forgiven. One falls; the other rises.

If we are all criminals in the sight of God, then the question is which criminal will we be? If we want forgiveness of sins and eternal life, then Jesus has made them available. He has made it so we too, like Simeon, can be dismissed from this world in peace because we have recognized the Savior. He has made it so we too, like the repentant criminal, can be welcomed into paradise by the Lord of Glory. It’s all been made available to us through faith in Jesus. That’s the song Simeon sang with joy. And I hope each of us will sing along.

Let’s pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, “The Nunc Dimittis,” in *The Incarnation in the Gospels*, ed. Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 125

<sup>4</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 52.

<sup>5</sup> The poet T. S. Elliot assumed as much when he offered a paraphrase of Simeon’s sentiments (“A Song for Simeon”:

“My life is light, waiting for the death wind,  
Like a feather on the back of my hand.  
Dust in sunlight and memory in corners  
Wait for the wind that chills towards the dead land....  
Now at this birth season of decease,  
Let the Infant, the still unspeaking and unspoken Word,  
Grant Israel’s consolation  
To one who has eighty years and no to-morrow....  
I am tired with my own life and the lives of those after me,  
I am dying in my own death and the deaths of those after me.  
Let thy servant depart,  
Having seen thy salvation.”

<sup>6</sup> Ryken, 126-127.

<sup>7</sup> “Those who imagine themselves to be strong and high, who rely on their own merit and power, will come to woeful ruin and undoing, because in their pride they do not realize their own need and doom and do not take refuge in Christ. But the humble ones, those who bend low at His feet with confession of sin and faith in Him, will be raised up by His mighty arm to eternal life.” N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 120.

<sup>8</sup> Ryken, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Anyabwile, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Ryken, 130-131.

<sup>11</sup> Josh Black, “Nunc Dimittis,” a sermon preached on December 25, 2016, at First Evangelical Free Church in Wichita, KS, and accessed online at: <http://firstfreewichita.org/sermons/sermon/2016-12-25/nunc-dimittis>.

<sup>12</sup> Alistair Begg, *Christmas Playlist: Four Songs that Bring You to the Heart of Christmas* (The Good Book Company, 2016), 54.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.