

I. I've been thinking about thinking lately. In particular, I've been thinking about how and what we see and understand. I've been wondering how we might what matter more clearly. I've been doing this for three reasons.

A. First, I'd like to get better at it. It seems like a lot starts here. Knowing what matters doesn't guarantee that we'll focus on what matters, but it's unlikely that we focus on what matters if we don't recognize that it matters.

B. Second, it grows out of our text. As you will see in a moment, some see and most don't.

C. And third, I was struck recently by my failure to see. I was in Los Angeles for the first part of the week at a couple events. The first is Praxis Labs.

D. You might remember that last year I was one of the judges charged with awarding \$100K to a few young social entrepreneurs in the startup phase of some venture – either a for-profit or not-for-profit organization that wanted to do good. We heard 12 pitches on Monday night and selected three to present to the entire conference, which voted and awarded the money. I did the same this year and was very encouraged by the creative ways these young leaders were trying to address big problems.

E. I then attended two days of presentations at Q: Ideas for the Common Good. Sort of a TEDS conference for Christians. The presentations were short – 3, 9 or 18 minutes long – but powerful.

1. Richard Sterns, the President of World Vision, laid out a plan to end extreme poverty.

2. Mark Barnett – the producer of Survivor, The Voice, Shark Tank, The Apprentice and now, more recently, The Bible series – talked about the rise of reality TV.<sup>1</sup>

3. There were several different presentations on ways to curb sexual slavery, which in this country expands by 100,000 new girls every year. And I do mean girls, because the average age at which they are forced into the trade is 11.

4. A political scientist who has studied the end of civilizations – and who says collapse inevitably follows periods of sexual confusion and growing debt – argued that we have ten to fifteen years before the West implodes.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett dislikes the term “reality TV.” He prefers “unscripted dramas.” His argument is that we were made for “story” and that the reason his shows have done so well is because he taps into that innate attraction.

5. There was a report on the history of the female swim suit and, based on neurological imaging, the effects various types of suits have on the male brain. (Ladies, if you were at this presentation should show up at the pool wearing a tent).<sup>2</sup>

6. We learned about the myth of multi-tasking and the way technology is making us dumb. There were presentations about immigration reform and a new, 3,500 mile “underground railroad” being used by Christians to smuggle North Koreans to freedom. There were presentations on the future of the family, depression, street art, the Middle East and capitalism.

F. It was exhilarating and exhausting and I came away unsettled. I was discouraged by the size of the problems we face. Many of the challenges ahead of us are bigger, uglier and more vexing than I appreciated. I was encouraged by the passion, insight and commitment coming from those who are focused on them. Really, there are some very gifted, talented leaders – and young leaders – out there.

G. And, just to be honest, I was unsettled by my jealousy over the very gifted, talented young leaders I was around.

1. I know that comparisons are always made at a distance and that no one is as put together as they appear. Jason Russell of Invisible People is a case in point. A few years ago he produced a video exposing Joseph Kony, the Ugandan warlord guilty of unspeakable crimes against humanity. You might remember that his video went viral. In fact, it was downloaded 100M times in six days. But shortly after that Russell was arrested for walking naked and deranged down the streets of San Diego and he spent the next few months in a mental hospital. He was there talking about how he was doing. He opened by stating that while he couldn’t promise he was sane he would commit to keeping his clothes on during the interview. I thought, well, I’ve had bad days. And there have been moments when I was ready to quit or get in the sail boat and just sail away. But I haven’t taken my clothes off and walked naked down the street.

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Rey was the presenter. (She was the White Power Ranger for Disney years ago). Her basic argument was that the less women wear the less likely men are to view them as people to be engaged and the more likely they are to be viewed as objects to be used. The frontal cortex of the male’s brain fails to light up when women show up wearing little.)

2. We make our comparisons very selectively. We don't want the personality of Bill Gates, we want his money. We don't want the athletic ability of Stephen Hawing, we want his IQ. We make our comparisons selectively and from a distance. Comparisons are not very helpful. I know that. But after most presentations I found myself thinking: I wish I was doing that. I wish I'd thought of that; I wish I was that gifted and accomplished; why do some people see things so clearly and I don't.

3. So, part of the reason I was thinking about thinking is because – in the dark jealousy of my own heart I was wondering why I wasn't being more insightful.

H. But, as I mentioned, thinking – or seeing reality – is part of our text. There are some people in Luke 2 who see things others did not. To be more specific, some people had a lot more clarity about Jesus than even Mary or Joseph did.

II. I invite you to turn to our passage. Luke 2:22-40.<sup>3</sup> As you do, let me set things up.

A. Last week we looked at the announcement an angel – and then a whole heavenly choir – made to the poor, forgotten and despised shepherds. They were the first to hear that the Messiah had arrived. I also argued that Luke is writing history – real events happening to real people and, he is among the many who force us into an up or down vote. Jesus doesn't claim to be a nice guy, he claims to be God. He thought and acted like God. His followers understood him to be God. His enemies understood him to claim to be God. So, either He's God or a Bad Man.

B. We now turn to the trip Mary, Joseph and Jesus made to the Temple, both for Mary's purification and in order to dedicate Jesus to God, two things that were required by Old Testament Law. Remember, under Moses God had established The Law – a set of moral, civil and ceremonial rules that the Jews were expected to follow. These start with the Ten Commandments but include all kinds of other regulations – 600 rules to be exact.

1. We no longer pay attention to the civil aspects of the Law because they do not apply. We are not Jews living in a theocracy, we are citizens of other countries that have their own civil laws.

2. And we dismiss the ceremonial aspects of the Law because we live on the other side of Christ's sacrifice. We do not need to pay attention to purification rites or the guidelines for Temple sacrifices because Christ's death put an end to the whole system.

<sup>3</sup> This passage is generally studied in March – on the Sunday that most closely corresponds to 40 days after Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> so that it ties in with the dedication of Christ 40 days after his birth.

3. We do pay attention to the moral law both because life works better when we do. (The Law is a reflection the way God made things to work. If we follow God's moral law life works better). We also focus on the moral Law because it shows us God's standards and, if nothing else, reminds us that we fall short and need a savior.

C. In Galatians 4 Paul explains that we used to be under the Law but "in the fullness of time God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of being children of God." We are on the other side of Christ's death than Mary and Joseph were. They were still trying to be righteous according to the Law. That meant they needed to keep all 600 rules found in the Old Testament.

1. One of them – found in Leviticus 12<sup>4</sup> – required a woman to go through a rite of purification 40 days after giving birth to a son.

2. Another – found in Numbers 18<sup>5</sup> – called for the first born son to be dedicated to God for service.<sup>6</sup>

### III. We are reading about that and more in Luke 2:22-40

A. <sup>22</sup> When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord<sup>7</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

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<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 12:1-5: The LORD said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "Say to the Israelites: 'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. <sup>3</sup> On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. <sup>4</sup> Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. <sup>5</sup> If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 18:15f: The first offspring of every womb, both human and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. <sup>16</sup> When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty *gerahs*.

<sup>6</sup> Every first born male was to be dedicated to the Lord. The boy was then almost always bought back (redeemed) by the parents for five shekels. You may remember that Hannah did not redeem her son, Samuel, back. See I Samuel 1:24-28

<sup>7</sup> One of the things that will start to pick up from a study of the Gospel of Luke is that some of the stories are left out. Where is the star? Where are the wise men with their gifts? Where is the flight away from Herod and the slaughter of the innocents? The answer is: in Matthew. Remember, everyone has a different audience and consequently a different angle. Matthew is writing for Jews, so showing how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy (Matthew

1. The law actually required a lamb, but those that were too poor to afford a lamb were allowed to sacrifice the less expensive birds.

2. Jesus – the Creator of everything – grew up poor. Not destitute, but he will know what it's like to go without. The Greek text actually makes it clear that He did not have an iPhone. (It's remarkable that he turned out as well as he did).

B. Vs. 25: Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel

1. He was waiting for Israel's hopes to be realized – for the Messiah to show up.<sup>8</sup>

C. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

1. There are a few plays on words going on in the Greek here. The name Simeon means "sign." So *sign* received a *sign*. Some people believe that they will not die before the Cubs win the World Series. Simeon did not have quite that much faith. But He did believe that he would not die before he saw the Messiah.

2. Please note that this insight was from the Holy Spirit. Some assume that Simeon was in the Temple because he was a priest. That is never stated. What we are told is that he was there that day because he was led there by the Spirit of God.

D. Vs. 27: Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. (I am ready to die.) For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

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2:13-15 / Hos 11:1) was important. Perhaps Luke didn't include this because he couldn't talk to them. Perhaps he didn't include it because he only had so much paper. I raise this here because, sometimes we are not given enough information to know how to put these together. Did this all happen before their flight to Egypt? After? At this moment it's not entirely don't know how to put all of this together.

<sup>8</sup> See Isaiah 40:1-5

1. These words make up the fourth song in Luke. Mary's prayer after speaking with Elizabeth was the first. Zechariah's comments after his son, John the Baptist, was named were the second. The angels' announcement to the shepherds was the third. Simeon's declaration is the fourth and final.
2. Three of these have Latin names. Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedicus*. Simeon's response is referred to as the *nunc dimittis*.<sup>9</sup> These titles come from the first words in Latin. And *nunc dimittis* means "now release" – or "I'm ready to die."
3. Remember, these songs were not sung at the time.<sup>10</sup> The events being described did not unfold like a spontaneous musical. We call them songs because the early church turned them into songs. And they were sung a lot. Starting in the fourth century those who follow high church liturgies would repeat Simeon's words every day. They became part of the daily prayers expected to be prayed by everyone.
4. And in addition to the music we also have lots of art – great paintings and icons – about this moment. We have both a sketch and a painting by Rembrandt. We have a second work by one of his students, Gerbrand Van Den Eeckhout. We have numerous icons, such as this one. This scene is also displayed in the stained glass windows of lots of churches.
5. This event comes up a lot. Why? Why the fuss? Why the music and the art? Why is it such a big deal?
6. Well, it's not insignificant that Simeon mentions that Jesus will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles," because that is shocking. It is not what anyone else seems to be thinking at the time. But, the main reason it gets so much attention is because Simeon appears to be the first person to really understand who Jesus is. Mary was the first to hear about her son. But she did not really "get it" for some time. She keeps "pondering" things. He keeps surprising her. Joseph is in the same camp. He knows there is something special about his adopted son. But he doesn't understand as much as Simeon.

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<sup>9</sup> *Nunc Dimittis* is Latin for "now dismiss" – i.e., allow to die. As with the other songs, this one is named after the first few words of the first stanza in Latin.

<sup>10</sup> We think the angels may have sung to the shepherds, but it doesn't specifically say that.

7. I saw a cartoon a few years ago that showed a bumper sticker on a donkey that Mary was riding. And instead of it saying, “Our son (daughter) is an honor student at such and such grade school” it simply read: Our Son is God. Well, if she ever put that sticker on the donkey she hadn’t put it on there yet. She didn’t completely get it. But Simeon did. And he is very excited and praises God for the chance to see him.

8. But, that is not all he says. Let me keep reading.

E. Verse 33: The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling (the collapse) and rising (the word here is *anastasis* – which means resurrection) of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. (Which is often not a happy thing. Our hearts tend to be quite dark. We generally act much better than our worst thoughts and impulses. So hearing that God not only reveals himself to us but also reveals what’s in our hearts is not the most welcome statement). And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

1. And the word used for sword here is a particularly lethal two-edged broadsword.<sup>11</sup>

2. This is not exactly the kind of thing a Mother wants to hear. Simeon says is: your son has an appointed destiny. He will grow up in the center of great controversy and strife. He will divide people and events. And, He will cause you great strife. Again, these are not the words of prophecy parents want to hear about their child.

3. And Simeon is not the only one talking about Jesus. A second witness steps forward.<sup>12</sup> Let me keep reading.

F. Verse 36: There was also a prophet, Anna (Hannah in Hebrew, a name that means “grace), Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The Greek term here is *rhomphaia*. This is not the word used in Hebrews 4:12. It is understood to be a more lethal weapon.

<sup>12</sup> Old Testament law required two witnesses to prove something. Luke may include Anna in order to have two trustworthy witnesses testifying about Christ.

<sup>13</sup> Simeon was not normally at the Temple but had been led there by the Holy Spirit to be there on the day Jesus was carried up the steps. Anna, on the other hand, was always there. She was 84 and spent all her time at the Temple praying, fasting and worshipping God.

G. Vs. 38: Coming up to them at that very moment (as Simeon is talking to them), she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

1. Simeon sees Jesus and says, “I’m ready to die. Anna sees Jesus and starts telling everyone around her. She’s not just a prophet she’s an evangelist.

H. Vs. 39: When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

IV. There are several things to see here. Remember, we are after insights that matter. We want to see things clearly, because if we do then we at least have a fighting chance of making good choices. To that there are a few things to see:

A. For starters, Mary and Joseph are committed to doing the right thing.

1. The trip to Jerusalem is long and hard. They undertake it to keep the law. Not everyone did, but they did. On five different occasions Luke will mention that Mary and Joseph do the right thing.

2. This is significant because we are not told much about the life of Christ before he is 30. We get just a few peeks between his birth and his baptism by John 30 years later – so we have to extrapolate on what little data we are given. The trip to Jerusalem for Mary’s purification and Jesus’s dedication supports the idea that He was raised in compliance with the law.<sup>14</sup>

B. Today’s passage also provides a bit of instruction to parents about raising children. We are to “take them to the Temple.” We are to point them to God.

1. I hear some parents say, “When it comes to religion, I’m going to let them make up their own mind when they grow up.” Bad plan. First of all, you do not let them find their own way in virtually any other setting. You show them how to think and live. You govern what they eat and drink, what they watch on TV, what web sites they visit, whether they go to class. That’s because, this is your job. Well, in like manner, their spiritual development is part of your charge – the spiritual formation of your children is one of your greatest responsibilities.

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<sup>14</sup> Which we are glad of! Jesus – who is called the Second Adam – gets it right. He does everything right. He fulfills the Law and then extends the credit for keeping the Law to us. He not only dies in our place, He gives us His righteousness. Happy Day! You will not hear better news than this.



C. It's also worth noting what an amazing event this was.

1. I think that heaven will include some replays of the great moments of all time, and the Presentation at the Temple will be one of them. We will see this then through very different eyes. It's not just that this is Christ's first time at the Temple,<sup>15</sup> or the sacred nature of parents bringing their infant child to God. It's a whole lot more than that. Stop and think about it.

2. What is the Temple? On the surface it's a massive structure that took tens of thousands of men sixty years to build. But what it really is is the place where God manifests His presence in a special way. No building can hold God, but He promised the Jews that on earth He would be there more than anywhere else. This meant that the temple was not simply the most sacred spot on the planet, it was where you went to meet God.

3. This is why if you go to Israel and visit the West Wall you see the orthodox praying right there. They stand at the only part of the Temple complex that still exists – some foundation stones for the courtyard. They do this because they believe that this is as close to God as anyone can get at this moment.

4. The Temple was the place people came to meet with God, pray to God, appeal to God, praise God, sing to God.

5. Now see this event through what we know now: The child being carried up the temple stairs by his mother is:

a) The new Temple, the true temple. He is the building's replacement. That is the claim. "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will rebuild it."<sup>16</sup>

b) He is the final and ultimate sacrifice. The Temple was the place where sacrifices were offered. He is the sacrifice that will put an end to the sacrificial system. We learn in Hebrews that the blood of animals cannot take away the sins of the world. Their blood was just a placeholder until Christ shed his blood.

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<sup>15</sup> Luke's Gospel starts with Zechariah praying in the temple, it ends shortly after Jesus is crucified not far from the Temple and it will include many other Temple references in between: Jesus will be brought to the pinnacle of the Temple by Satan and offered a kingdom without a cross; He will teach here over and over; He will overturn the tables of the money changers here, etc. See Luke 19:47; 20:1; 21:37f; 22:53

<sup>16</sup> Jesus is the new Temple. This is why He will later say – John 2: "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will rebuild it." They replied, "It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

c) He is the high priest. Who worked at the temple? The priests, including the High Priest. He is now the ultimate priest. We have no need for any other because Jesus stands between us and the Father. We enter into God's presence in Christ's name. At his death the veil that kept everyone out of the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom because in Christ we can now come directly before God.

d) I can go on. He is the cornerstone. The Temple was built on these huge stones and each one was imprinted with Herod the Great's mark. But, Jesus is the new Corner Stone.

6. Think about what we have happening here. This young peasant girl from Nazareth is ascending the steps with an infant in her hands – but this infant is God. He is her creator and savior. He is the temple, the fulfillment of the sacrificial system, the Pascal Lamb, the High Priest, the Corner Stone, the Scape Goat.

7. The symbolism here – the backstory, the view from heaven of what is really happening – makes this one of the epic moments of all time.

8. And... and... at the time, only two people see it. Only two people get it. Only two people have anything close to a real appreciation for what is going on: Simeon and Anna.

V. And that leads us full circle. That brings us back to our point about insight. To the question – how can we see reality more clearly? The answer is: the Holy Spirit.

A. If this were a talk on insight generally I'd make different points.

B. I'd start by telling you to hang in there. Learning – seeing things – doesn't happen along a steady path. You have break throughs. Eureka Moments. If you've taught a child to read you may remember this. They don't get it and they don't get it and they don't get it and then... they get it. Or, you experience this with new software on your computer. You don't get it. You don't get it. You are thinking that you are about to be exposed as a fraud. You will never learn it and then... suddenly "you get it." So if this was a general talk about insight I'd start by saying, "hang in there. You'll get it."

C. And I'd probably also talk about the things we can do to get it: read, hang out with people who get it, spend time with people who think different than you do. There is a process you can follow.

D. And if this was a talk about general spiritual growth – what you can do to better understand Jesus – I’d direct you back to the path I’ve set before you many times before: worship, connect, grow, serve and share.

E. There are things that could be said. But what do we see in this text? Simeon gets it because it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. Just like it later will be with Peter. When Jesus asks, “Who am I?” and Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus answers saying, “You are right. In fact, you are so right that I know that answer was revealed to you by God.” As Calvin brilliantly writes, Simeon “beheld the Son of God with eyes other than the flesh.”

F. Part of the answer here is that we are dependent on God for the insight we need. That may not strike you as good news, because it leaves more up to him than you like. But, at one level, that is the story.

G. Does that mean there is nothing we can do? Not at all. Simeon was already in the habit of following God when he was led to the Temple by the Holy Spirit. And Anna was already seeking God – she spent her time praying and worshipping at the Temple. It seems pretty clear, they were doing all they could do to follow. And in light of that, God gave them the insights that changed everything for them.

H. And you know who else got it? Do you know who else recognized Jesus? The wise men! Luke doesn’t talk about them. That account is in Matthew, probably because Matthew wanted to show how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of being called out of Egypt. We do not know much about their story, but we know that they were seeking God and following the path as clearly as they could discern it. That’s what we are being called to.

I. So, we seek God. We seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And we ask for God to direct our steps. To show us and lead us so that we might see.

J. It looks different for you than it is for me. Some principles apply across the board: Keep seeking. Keep reading. Keep praying. I promise you there are insights to be gained as you learn to listen to God and place him first. He will reveal more and more of himself to you as you do.