

The Consolation of Israel (Tidings of Comfort)

Luke 2:21-40 on December 22, 2024

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please read Luke 2:21-40 before going further in this transcript.

During the Christmas season we sing about “tidings of comfort and joy.”¹ In fact, in the first two chapters of Luke’s Gospel, he’s already mentioned joy several times including, when Zechariah and Elizabeth receive the news about their son John, and when John leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s voice, and when the angels tell the shepherds about the “good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” “Tidings of comfort and joy.” But as important as “tidings of joy” can be,² today we’re going to focus on “tidings of *comfort*.” The title of today’s message is “The Consolation of Israel.” Consolation can be defined as the comfort, relief, and reassurance that God brings to those who are sad or disheartened.² Early in the 1st century, God’s people living in Israel were feeling more than a little disheartened. Not only had they been defeated and demoralized by Roman occupation, but they felt distant from God because He’d been silent for so long. They were wondering if He still cared for them, if He would ever get around to fulfilling His Old Testament promises to them. Today’s text brings a message of comfort for God’s people, for those who were living in the 1st century, and for those of us who are living in this century.

Luke 2:21 begins, “On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.”³ Jesus’ parents make sure that their son is circumcised just like any other good Jewish family would do. And yet, Luke records this, not just as a matter of common practice, but also to establish that Jesus is directly identified with God’s covenant people.^{4 5 6 7} In the words of

¹ These lyrics are from the song, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.

² “something that makes someone who is sad or disappointed feel better.”

(<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/consolation>) “something that gives comfort to someone who is sad or disappointed” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/consolation>)

³ The covenant of circumcision goes all the way back to the time of Abraham. Genesis 17:11-12 says, “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised....”

⁴ Earlier Luke 1:68, 72-73 records, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. ...72 to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, 73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham.”

⁵ “when Jesus undergoes circumcision, he identifies with Israel, not all humans, since circumcision is a national rite.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 225.

⁶ This also helps to set up the context for where Luke is heading in the coming verses.

⁷ By the way, it was a bit unusual for them to give Jesus His name on the 8th day, rather than on the day of His birth. However, this may be a way of even further emphasizing that Jesus came as one born under God’s law, and intimately connected to God’s covenant with Israel. This ties back to John the Baptist’s unusual naming as well. Consider Luke 1:72-73 in light of this comment on Abraham: “Usually a child received their name immediately after birth, but Abram received the name ‘Abraham’ when he was circumcised (Genesis 17:5,23-24). Both John (1:60) and Jesus (2:21) received their names when they

Galatians 4, Jesus was “born under the law [in order to] redeem those under the law.” Joseph and Mary were devoted to God, so in obedience to the angel’s instruction, back in Luke 1:31, they now name their son Jesus.

Luke then fast forwards to when Jesus is a little over a month old. Luke 2:22-24 says, “When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), 24 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.” So they journey north about 5 miles, from Bethlehem up to Jerusalem. Luke compresses two different religious rites together here: the purification of the mother, & the consecration of the son. Both of these practices are pretty foreign to most of us listening to this message today, but, for 1st century Jews, these were standard practice, dating back to the Old Testament.

As far as Mary’s purification, following the birth of a son, the law required that mothers wait 40 days, and then go to the temple to offer a sacrifice.⁸ To be clear, this purification wasn’t about some sin that Mary had committed; it had to do with the significance of blood in the sacrificial system, and Mary’s exposure to blood when she gave birth. This was a ritual cleansing for Mary, which was performed by a priest who sacrificed two birds on her behalf.⁹ ¹⁰ The mention of “a pair of doves or two young pigeons” in verse 24 indicates that Jesus’ family wasn’t rich, since this was the recommended offering for any household who couldn’t afford a lamb. This is a good reminder to each one of us today, that it’s not about the financial size of our offering, but rather about our obedience to the Lord. We can only give what we have to give, and we should give it.¹¹

As far as Jesus’ consecration, this connects all the way back to the Passover, after which the Lord required that every firstborn son must be consecrated to Him. This was in commemoration of God sparing the lives

were circumcised, probably to highlight their connection with the Abrahamic promises.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2069 footnote on Luke 1:59.

⁸ “Following the birth of a son, the mother had to wait 40 days before going to the temple to offer a sacrifice for her purification.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1705 footnote on Luke 2:22.

⁹ Leviticus 12:1-8 gives the details of the purification rites for a woman after giving birth. The gist of all this has to do with being ceremonially unclean from the blood that’s involved in childbirth. This may sound strange to our ears, and our way of thinking, but it was quite normal for any Jew who was following the beliefs and customs of the Hebrew people. And, especially important for any Jew who wanted to honor Yahweh and walk in holiness before Him.

¹⁰ So the family would bring these two birds to the temple in Jerusalem, and then the priest would make the sacrificial atonement for her, and she would be clean before the Lord.

¹¹ This principle of giving according to our means occurs all throughout Scripture. 2 Corinthians 8:12 says, “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.” Also consider Matthew 25:15 and Acts 11:29.

of the Israelite's firstborn sons during the final plague against Egypt.¹² Well, that's a very brief overview of a big chunk of history and ritual which was important to Jesus' parents, and also important to His own Jewish heritage. Jesus' parents were obedient to follow all of the required religious rites in a way that was pleasing to God. In all three of these verses, 22,23,24, Luke mentions the Law, in order to emphasize that Jesus "obeys and fulfills the law of Moses."¹³

Luke 2:25-26 go on, "Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." Now, this may sound a bit morbid, but what an incredible promise was given to Simeon here! And what an incredible thing that you and I get to read about it, and appreciate this consolation along with him. This consolation is referring to the comfort that would come to God's people when His Messiah came – this is what our season of Advent is all about, the COMING of the Lord, and the tidings of comfort He brings!¹⁴ Now we're not given much detail about Simeon, which leaves us to believe that he was a godly layman, rather than an official priest, which makes his role in all of this all the more compelling.¹⁵ God has been preparing this simple man of faith for a long time. This righteous and devout follower, has been eagerly awaiting this very moment, when Jesus' parents carry Him into the temple.

Verses 27-28 say that, "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, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:" Can you imagine taking little baby Jesus in your arms? Many of you know that our family had the incredible joy this week of holding our new little granddaughter; what incredible joy! And yet, Simeon wasn't just thrilled to be holding a beautiful little baby in his arms, he was thrilled because of what this baby was bringing with him: "the consolation of Israel." Simeon praised God because comfort had finally come to God's people; relief and reassurance for their sad and disheartened state. And this comfort would extend not just to Israel, but, praise the Lord, it would extend all nations, as the following verses will make clear.

¹² See Exodus 13:1-2. "Israel's firstborn sons must be consecrated to the Lord to respond to God's sparing the lives of their firstborn sons during the Passover." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2071 footnote on Luke 2:23.

¹³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2071 footnote on Luke 2:22-40.

¹⁴ "The consolation of Israel" is "The comfort the Messiah would bring to his people at his coming." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1705 footnote on Luke 2:25.

¹⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 237.

Simeon takes baby Jesus up in his arms and praises the Lord with his famous, “Nunc dimittis,” “now dismiss.” “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32) Seeing this child meant seeing God’s salvation, literally. This wasn’t some symbol or metaphor; this was God’s actual salvation contained within this tiny little baby. Simeon knew this, because he had been waiting for it, and because it had been revealed to him by God’s Spirit. And not only did Simeon see it, but Luke makes it clear that the Lord’s salvation had been prepared “in the sight of all nations.” God’s salvation is for all peoples!¹⁶ That’s why we need to keep sending out and supporting our Global Partners, both locally and globally.

Verse 32 clarifies that Jesus, the Lord’s salvation, is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” John 3:19 comes to mind, “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” Light suggests the need for illumination because the darkness is so tough to navigate.¹⁷ So as much as we want to embrace this message of consolation and comfort, we must begin by admitting why we need it: we love the darkness of sin. The light of Christ comes into our world, and it exposes just how much we need the light of God’s revelation. Friends, if we ever want to truly experience God’s comfort and consolation, then we must begin by being sad and disheartened about our sin. We need to admit our love for darkness, and turn away from it, in faith toward Jesus. Believing the Christmas message isn’t just about finding joy during the month of December, it’s about finding comfort for the rest of our lives. That comfort is found through faith in Jesus Christ, and you could make the decision to receive His salvation today. If you’d like to experience God’s comfort in your life, then I urge you to do that in the quietness of your own heart, or to reach out to our church and talk with someone about it.

Luke 2:32 goes on to mention, “...the glory of your people Israel.” This, above all other things, is what makes the nation of Israel so very special, even still today: God’s salvation has come through it, through the birth of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Sadly though, back in the 1st century, and even still today, many of Israel’s people have not embraced nor experienced this glory, because they continue to reject Christ. Bible commentator Darrell Bock says it well: “Jesus is...Israel’s glory... all the nation’s hopes come to

¹⁶ This is the first time in Luke’s Gospel where the Gentile component of God’s master redemptive plan is explicitly stated, but it will not be the last time. Particularly as we get to Luke’s sequel: Acts.

¹⁷ “Light suggests the coming of illumination into a place of darkness.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 244.

¹⁸ “At the heart of what makes the nation special is that salvation comes through it.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 245.

fruition in him.”¹⁹ So, for those Israelites who reject Jesus, there will be no glory, and there will be no comfort, because these are only possible through faith in Christ.

Simeon actually goes on to talk about this rejection in the following verses. Luke 2:34-35 says, “Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother:²⁰ “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” This “falling and rising” in verse 34 is referring to the contrasting responses to Jesus by the Jewish people.²¹ Some of them would fall due to their rejection of Christ, and some of them would rise due to their faith in Him. Many of Jesus most devoted followers were Israelites, but so were many of His harshest critics.²² Of course, none of this caught God by surprise; He predicted as much through the words of Simeon’s prophecy. Verse 35 puts it frankly: “the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.” Bock gives a helpful clarification: The Greek word used here in verse 35 for “thoughts” indicates “HOSTILE thoughts. ...Jesus’ ministry shows where hearts really are before God....”^{23 24 25 26}

¹⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 255.

²⁰ It’s unclear why in verse 34 Simeon addresses his words directly to Mary, but it may have to do with the theory that Joseph dies before Jesus’ public ministry. In other words, Mary would be alive to see it and go through it with her son, but Joseph would perhaps not be.

²¹ Verse 34 “most likely refers to the Jews’ divided response to Jesus. Some will reject the Good News, while others will accept it.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2072 footnote on Luke 2:34.

²² “Jesus will divide Israel. ...Jesus forces choices and, as a result, some people will fall rather than rise.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 233.

²³ “...Jesus will expose those who do not believe. He is the litmus test for the individual Jewish responses to the fulfillment of their promise. Do they believe it or not?” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 250.

²⁴ Those who reject Jesus will themselves be rejected. In the words of John 3:18, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

²⁵ And yet, as the end of verse 35 foresees, even those who accept Jesus will not go unscathed. Simeon shares a dire prediction: a sword will pierce Mary’s own soul too. In other words, as the HOSTILE thoughts of people’s hearts are revealed, they will oppose her Son and speak out against him, and that will not be a heavy burden for her to bear. In her lifetime, Mary would have a front row seat not only to those who would love and accept her Son, but also to those who would scorn and abuse Him throughout His public ministry.

²⁶ Here we see a foreshadowing not only of Mary’s eventual suffering and anguish over the crucifixion of her son, but also of what lies ahead for this precious little child. Simeon’s closing comment about a sword piercing Mary’s own soul too leaves us wondering exactly what he’s referring to. As far as we know, this wasn’t a literal sword, but rather some kind of an illustration of the future pain she would suffer. Ultimately this may refer to her one day having to watch her son be crucified, but the preceding context suggests that her suffering would be related to the division her son would bring, and the future reality of watching her son be publicly rejected and ridiculed by some. See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, pp. 248-250.

A number of us reading this sermon, have probably encountered the kind of opposition and division that following Jesus can bring. Perhaps members of our own family, or a particular friend group, have been divided by Jesus. As much as we may try to get along with one another, make no bones about it, we disagree about Jesus. Some of us are deeply devoted to following Him, and others have rejected Him and denied His claims as Savior and Lord. This part of the Christmas message isn't one we particularly enjoy thinking about, but it's a significant part of Christmas, nonetheless. And it's another reason why we need to embrace the comfort and reassurance that comes with "the consolation of Israel." (*Thankfully, even in the midst of our most difficult relational dynamics, God provides comfort, and relief, and reassurance when we're feeling sad or disheartened by the realities of these divisions.*)

Luke then moves on to tell us about a woman named Anna, who was also at the temple that day. Luke 2:36-37 says, "There was also a prophet, 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, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying."²⁷ ²⁸ My *NIV Study Bible* notes that the tribe of Asher was a northern tribe, so Luke may be highlighting "Anna's northern origin, [and] her presence represents the northern kingdom as it also witnesses the presence of God's salvation among his entire people."²⁹ In other words, the witnesses of Jesus' birth and the testimonies as to his identity just keep pouring in.

So far Luke's Gospel account has traced its way...

...through the angel Gabriel to the priest Zechariah and his elderly wife Elizabeth and their son John, who would be the forerunner of Christ,

...then through Gabriel again, to young Mary,

...then through the angels appearing to the working-class shepherds, and the shepherds spreading the word to all kinds of people.

...and now today we have the testimonies of a layman named Simeon and a prophetess named Anna.

The diversity of these witnesses stands as a testament to how God works in and through all different kinds of people to declare the Good News about

²⁷ Now when verse 37 says that Anna "never left the temple," this may be hyperbole. But, it could also mean that she somehow had a special arrangement to live in one of the side rooms of the temple. Regardless, Anna spent the majority of her waking hours in worship, fasting, and prayer. See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1706 footnote on Luke 2:37.

²⁸ She was a godly woman who spent her days in God's presence. Does this sound good to you, spending your days doing nothing but worshipping, fasting, and praying? I think this level of intensity takes a special calling. And yet, I'll admit, it sounds better and better to me lately. This has been an exceptionally busy and wonderful year, and yet it's also a particularly brutal and difficult year. Just staying in the temple, and enjoying God's presence and worshipping and talking with Him, sounds really good to me.

²⁹ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2072 footnote on Luke 2:36.

His Son. In His providence, God ensures that the comfort and joy of the Christmas message is attested to by many, and heard by all.

Culturally speaking, Anna would have likely been married around age 13 or 14, so she was likely widowed in her early 20's, and then remained a widow for some 60+ years.³⁰ She was a pretty remarkable woman of God; rather than seeking another husband, which would have been entirely appropriate, she instead found her comfort and contentment in a life dedicated to serving God.³¹

This put her in the ideal position to be an eyewitness of the Christchild. Luke 2:38 says, "Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."³² To be clear, Anna is referring to something much bigger than the salvation of just one special city. You see, not only is Jerusalem near and dear to the hearts of the Israelite people, but it's also a city that's representative of the people of Israel as a whole.³³ So in "looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem," what we're really talking about here is looking forward to the redemption of the Israelites, and ultimately, to the redemption of all Israel, which will come to include even the Gentiles who will be grafted in.³⁴ This gets a little complicated, because phrases like "the redemption of Jerusalem," and terms like "Israel" can refer to a much broader group. Be that as it may, rather than wading through these nuances, instead let's consider what it means to look *forward* to our redemption.

Whether we're focusing specifically on the people of Israel, or referring more broadly to God's people as a whole, there is clearly a "now and not yet" dimension to the comfort we receive. In other words, when Christ came to earth and purchased our redemption, He did that once and for all, and His sacrifice was completely sufficient to purchase our salvation, which brings us incredible comfort and reassurance. And yet, we're also looking forward to the fullness of our redemption at Jesus 2nd coming, when He will make all things new, and our comfort will abound in all things. In other words, some of what God's people had been waiting for came at Christmas, but some of it, we're still waiting for. So while we wait for the rest of it, we need to let the Christmas story remind us that God keeps His promises. We can have full confidence that God will continue to fulfill His

³⁰ So after her husband died, she "chose a lifetime of service to God over remarriage." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, pp. 251-252.

³¹ Consider 1 Corinthians 7:29-35.

³² Consider the end of Luke's Gospel, when the two men on the Road to Emmaus say this in Luke 24:21, "... we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel...."

³³ "The holy city of God's chosen people; here it stands for Israel as a whole." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1706 footnote on Luke 2:37.

³⁴ Consider Romans 2:28-29, 9:6-8, and Galatians 3:26-29, 6:16, and Philippians 3:2-4.

promises, right on up to Jesus' 2nd coming, and our final glorification in heaven.

With this in mind, let me close by sharing an excerpt from one of the Advent devotionals that we gave away this month; it's titled, "Unto Us." Andrew Spencer wrote this about comfort:

"In our moments of greatest distress, we need someone to remind us things are going to be ok. ...It doesn't take away all the distress, but it does help us endure. ...when we look beyond our temporary discomforts and toward our spiritual freedom in Christ, it can help us bear up under a mountain of bad news. God is for us, our sin has been pardoned, and it's going to be alright. ...even when words of comfort feel like a blanket that doesn't quite cover our toes, the incomplete comfort is a blessing because it reminds us of the greater comfort to come. ...God doesn't promise us an easy life, but he does promise complete renewal one day.

We celebrate the King's birth to remind us [that] we still wait for the King's final coming. ...one day, the difficulties of this life will pass away. When the night is darkest and our toes are coldest, we need a reminder that this isn't the way life is supposed to be. Christmas is that reminder. ...We already know salvation is coming, yet we won't get the full measure of comfort until we see Christ face to face. There's comfort in that knowledge, even as we wait for the promise's fulfillment."³⁵

³⁵ Winfree Brisley and Jared Kennedy, editors, *Unto Us*, The Gospel Coalition, Columbia, MO, 2024, pp. 12-13.