

**FINISHING WELL:
Doing Well in Life to Finish Well in Death**
(Luke 2:21-35)

I. THIS MORNING'S TEXT

21 And when eight days were completed for His circumcision, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

22 Now when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present *Him* to the Lord **23** (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every *first-born* male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), **24** and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

25 And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name *was* Simeon, and this man *was* righteous and devout, looking for the Consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. **26** 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. **27** So he came by 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, **28** he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: **29** "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; **30** for my eyes have seen Your salvation, **31** which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, **32** a light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel." **33** And His father and mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. **34** Then 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 will be spoken against **35** (yes, a sword will pierce your own soul as well), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

36 Now there was a prophetess *named* Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years from her virginity, **37** and then as a widow until the age of eighty-four. And she did not depart from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and prayers night and day. **38** And coming up at that very moment, she gave thanks to God, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

II. INTRODUCTION

A. Opening Prayer

B. Opening Illustration

- Liturgical churches have long used Simeon's prayer in their worship services; it is called THE NUNC DIMMITIS. The BCP renders it thus: "*LORD, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, amen.*"

- Fittingly, they use it at the close of (evening) *worship services* (HSL)
- Still more fittingly, they use it at the close of funeral services. *It is meant to express the hope and confidence that the departed loved one has indeed departed from this world in CHRIST, and therefore in PEACE*
- **MP: Truly, it is a great thing to be able to depart from this world in peace; to face death not only with confidence, but also with holy expectancy and joy. In short, it is a great thing to do as Simeon and Anna did: to FINISH WELL.**
- Caveat: But for us (redeemed) sinners, finishing well is not so easy. In this fallen world there are many obstacles that can prevent or hinder it. For this reason, the Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes wrote: *“If we desire to end our days in joy and comfort, let us now lay the foundation for a comfortable death. To die well is not so light a thing as some imagine; it is no easy matter. To die well is a matter of every day; it is the action of the whole life.”* From there Sibbes goes on to tell us what we must *do well now*, so that we will *finish well then*.
- MP: In this matter, Simeon and Anna have much to teach us. Let us work our way through our text, keeping an eye out for truths, attitudes, and actions that will enable us all to FINISH WELL

II. (21) THE CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST

A. Text: *And when eight days were completed for His circumcision, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.*

B. Intro

- This is the first of three OT rituals that Joseph and Mary observed in connection with Jesus’ birth: Jesus’ circumcision, Joseph and Mary’s purification, and Jesus’ redemption
- Because Jesus was the sinless Son of God, all three were completely unnecessary for Himself; nevertheless, *all three were necessary for us!*
- Why were these necessary? Answer: a fourth! Jesus’ Baptism (HSL)
- MP: He sweetly humbled Himself for us, so that we could become the righteousness of God in Him.

C. Example #1: Circumcision: A picture of the spiritual circumcision that God grants to His people, that they might know Him. Jesus humbly submits to physical circumcision, so that His righteousness can be credited to us, so that we can be spiritually circumcised—granted the gift of new, Spirit-filled hearts, shorn of the power and presence of the flesh.

III. (22-24) Purification and Redemption

A. Text: *Now when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every first-born male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."*

B. Purification

- The nature of the Law (Lev. 12, cu for 8 days, circ., cu for 32 days; the offerings: lamb and t/p, two turtledoves/pigeons)
- The spiritual meaning of the Law (HSL)
- Mary did not NEED to be purified, for no spiritual defilement had entered the world through her womb
- But all three humbled themselves "to fulfill righteousness; to fulfill the requirement of the Law" in our behalf.

C. Presentation/Redemption

- History (The Exodus: Final plague against firstborn man and beast; Israel's firstborn guilty (indeed, all Israel), but redeemed by Passover Lamb; later, a memorial ritual: firstborn males must be redeemed; originally by Levites, plus a ransom of 5 shekels; later by presentation and payment of the ransom alone)
- So, was the Redeemer redeemed? Not at all! But he humbled himself, submitting to the righteous requirement of the law, so that WE might be redeemed! (He was the Perfect Israelite, that we might be the perfect Israel of God)

D. Finishing Well: Both in life, and especially at death, let us think hard and often about the active obedience of Christ; about his perfect submission to the minute details of the Law of Moses. For it is not only his atoning death that secures our eternal life in heaven, but his perfectly righteous life, credited to our account. This is a GREAT comfort, one that turns the valley of the shadow of death into "the suburbs of heaven." (EG. MACHEN's word on his death-bed: "I am thinking about the active obedience of Christ!")

III. (25-35) THE STORY OF SIMEON

A. (25-26) Introducing Simeon

1. Text: **25** *And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.*

2. Key Points

- A layman
- Righteous (action, Z and E) and devout (attitude, orientation)
- Finishing Well: Sibbes on the importance of a clear conscience:

“Saint Paul labored to keep a good conscience in all things. ‘**14** But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets: **15** and having hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. **16** And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and men.’ *A guilty conscience trembles at the mention of death. But, beloved, the exercising of our hearts to keep a clear conscience can only breed in us the opposite, a desire to depart and be with Christ.*”

- Looking for the Consolation of Israel
 1. Adverse conditions in Israel (external oppression, spiritual decline)
 2. Adverse conditions today
 3. Adverse conditions due to the Fall
 4. All are meant to beget and nurture in us a habit of LOOKING TO and LONGING FOR the one and only true Consolation: The Advent of Christ. In Simeon’s case, the first Advent. In our case, three (John 14:1f): a) seasons of refreshing from on high, b) His coming for us in the Spirit at the moment of death, c) His coming for His Bride at the end of the age
 5. MP: *We are actively preparing for a good finish when we see that sufferings are designed by God to cultivate within us a longing for the world above.*
- The Holy Spirit was upon Him

To Note Well: The Spirit was not only upon Simeon! Now, after some 400 years of divine silence, there is a great stirring of the Spirit—who comes upon Zecharias, Elizabeth, Mary, the Shepherds, Simeon, and Anna. This is fitting, since now the Messiah has come into the world—He who is about to inaugurate the Last Days, *the Era of the Spirit in which all of God’s people will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, led by the Spirit, and prophesy.* More on this in a moment!

B. (26) A Personal Promise!

1. Text: **26** *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.*

- Simeon had received a very special personal PROMISE! (HSL)

C. (27-32) A Promise Come True

1. Text: **27** *So he came by 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, 28 he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: 29 "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; 30 for my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, 32 a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."*

- So he came by the Spirit into the temple (HSL)
- "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word." Why?
- ***"For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all peoples (HSL)***

²¹ But now, apart from law, *the* righteousness of God has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets; ²² even *the* righteousness of God *that comes* through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. For there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God publicly displayed as a site of reconciliation, ¹⁰ *accessible* through faith in his *shed* blood. – Romans 3

- a light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles (who lived in darkness) (HSL)
- and the glory of Your people Israel. (who lived in half-light) (HSL)
- Finishing Well: Here is the Christian's supreme Comfort and Consolation in the face of death: *The Finished Work of Christ; His active and passive obedience in our behalf*. Doubtless our own good works, wrought in Christ and by His Spirit, will be a source of comfort in that day. But as we go through life, sincerely seeking to walk with Him, we shall find that our works count for less and less, and His for more and more! Let us see to it, then, that the work of Christ mightily overshadows our works, and we shall do well. E.g., of Paul, Phil. 3:8-9.
- Note: Hymn: Before the Throne of God Above

D. (33-35) Simeon's Prophecy

1. Text: **33** *And His father and mother marveled at those things that were spoken of Him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed (set) for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that will be spoken against 35 (yes, a sword will pierce your own soul as well), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."*

- Here, Simeon prophesies
- *The Child is set:* by God as a Stone of Testing (for Israel)
- *For the fall and rising of many in Israel* (cf. Magnificat)
- *And for a sign:* of God's presence, truth, and will for all who encounter Christ
- *That will be spoken against* (and for!)
- *Yes, a sword will pierce your own soul as well:* By such talk, HE will be pierced; and Mary's soul as well, by many things, but especially the outcome of that talk, the death of her son)
- *Caveat:* The piercing will hurt, it will be short-lived, and replaced by joy unspeakable and full of glory!
- *That the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.* John 3 and the Gospel Plow
- Peter's testimony about all this:

⁴Coming to Him *as to* a living stone, utterly rejected by men, but chosen and precious in the sight of God, ⁵you yourselves, as living stones, are also being built up *as a* spiritual house, in order to become a holy priesthood, *and* to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶Therefore, this is found in Scripture:³ "Behold, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone; and he who believes on Him will never be put to shame."⁴ ⁷Therefore, to you who believe, *He is* precious; but to those who disbelieve, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,"⁵ ⁸and "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense".⁶ They stumble because they are disobedient to the word, to which also they were appointed. – 1 Peter 2

- **MP: *In order to finish well, let true believers in Christ grow in their understanding that if they belong to Him, it is because they were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, and therefore eternally secure!***

IV. THE STORY OF ANNA

A. (36-37) Introducing Anna

1. Text: **36** *Now there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with a husband seven years from her virginity, 37 and then as a widow until the age of eighty-four. And she did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*

- Why didn't Anna remarry; what kept her all her days?
- Answer: She was a prophetess!
- Her ministry was described by Isaiah hundreds of years before:

I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth. –Isaiah 62

- Anna is a picture of the Church: for today, after Pentecost, ALL God's people are prophets!
- Anna is a picture of the Church: *A widow in the World* (cast out, marginalized, bereft of her Husband), *a Bride in the Temple* (safe, secure, protected, and loved by Her Husband)
- Anna is a picture of the Church: given over to the ministry of bringing in the Kingdom of God and bringing back her King!
- **MP: *Anna finished well because she was “always abounding in the work of Lord.” Let us do the same!***

B. Anna's ministry of prophetic encouragement

1. Text: *38 And coming up at that very moment, she gave thanks to the God, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.*

- A Spirit-led woman
- Always giving thanks and praise to God
- Always aware of the downward pull of the world, the flesh, the devil—and “the news”
- And therefore ever aware of the saints need of prophetic encouragement . . . and well able to give it to them in the power of the Holy Spirit
- **MP: *Anna finished well because she loved the saints and sought to encourage them; let us do the same!***

V. CONCLUSION: FINISHING WELL

A. What we have learned about finishing well

- Live righteous and devout lives, maintaining a clear conscience (S)
- Live as a widow in the world, but a bride in the temple, ever seeking and waiting upon the Lord (A)

- Fulfill your ministry as a NT prophet, encouraging others with Spirit-filled words from the Lord as they make their pilgrimage through the Valley of Tears
- Grow in your understanding of God’s Salvation: the Person and Work of Christ
 - a) His active obedience in life, leading to our righteousness
 - b) His passive obedience in death, leading to our forgiveness

AND SEE TO IT THAT HIS WORK ALWAYS OVERSHADOWS OURS!

- Grow in your understanding of Israel’s True Consolation. Realize that the sufferings of this life are meant to fix our longing and our look for the unspeakable joys of the next, wherein, at long last, we shall see the Lord as He is, and become just like Him: free, holy, and happy forevermore!

B. What we can expect when we do it:

- An open heaven at the moment of death
- The case of Stephen

C. One who experienced just this:

- The story of Lizzie Atwater of Fenchow (Reading)

D. Concluding Prayer: “Give us to know that heaven is all love, where the eye affects the heart, and the continual viewing of Thy beauty keeps the soul in continual transports of delight. Give us to know that heaven is all peace, where error, pride, rebellion, and passion raise no head. Give us to know that heaven is all joy—the end of believing, fasting, praying, mourning, humbling, watching, fearing, and repining. And lead us to it soon. In Jesus Name, Amen.”

– Valley of Vision