

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (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.”

²⁵ 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 upon him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. 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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

*²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

³³ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “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.”

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, 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. ³⁸ 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.

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. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (Luke 2:22-40)

What does Jesus Do to You?

When you think of Jesus – when you picture him in your mind – what do you think of? Do you think of Jesus dying on the cross? That might be the most popular image of Jesus. And for good reason. That is Jesus. That picture shows us who he really is by showing us his love. The next most popular image might be all the way on the opposite end of his life: Jesus in the manger. That, too, is Jesus. Of course, there are lots of other images of Jesus. My great-grandparents had a picture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. That’s a popular view of him. And so are pictures of Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus being baptized, the risen Jesus coming to his disciples in the locked room. All those pictures that God paints for us in the scriptures show us who Jesus really is. So does the picture in our gospel lesson for today.

It’s not as familiar a picture. But forty days after Jesus was born – so when he was not quite six weeks old – his parents brought him to the temple in Jerusalem. They offered a sacrifice that the Old Testament law required when a baby was born. That birth made the mother – and by extension the child – unclean. Unclean – not in any kind of sanitary or health related sense or even in the sense of smelling or looking bad out in public. They were ceremonially unclean. They couldn’t go to the temple and participate in Jewish religious life until they were purified. So Joseph and Mary and Jesus came.

In this reading, Jesus does nothing. He is presented and sacrificed for. He is noticed and talked about. But he was six weeks old. He probably didn’t do a whole lot more than sleep and maybe cry a little bit. Yet that baby touched hearts that day. As we consider not just this moment, but the whole life that Simeon prophesied for this child, we want to look at the impact he has on our lives, too. My friends, **what does Jesus do to you?**

I.

Notice, I said “to you” rather than “for you.” That was on purpose. In this lesson, Jesus actually does something incredibly important for us: the Son of God submits to being purified. He takes another step in fulfilling God’s law for us. But what Jesus does for us changes every person who hears about it – even unbelievers who reject it. One person who was there in the temple put the impact of Christ into words that the church has been singing them ever since. His name was Simeon. The Holy Spirit gave him insight into the life that Jesus had just begun to lead.

What does Jesus do to you? Does he cause you to fall? That might seem like a strange question to ask us, especially in light of that beautiful song of Simeon. God had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the promised Savior. The Holy Spirit moved him to go to the temple that day and then God put these beautiful words into Simeon’s mouth: **“For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”** What is there in that to make anyone fall? Well, that wasn’t the last thing Simeon said. He told Mary, **“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against.”**

How could the light of the Gentiles and the glory of Israel cause people to fall? Well, by doing the things that caused him to be spoken against. Simeon said that Jesus was a *sign* that would be spoken against. Jesus’ ministry didn’t depend on his charisma or his people skills. When Jesus preached and taught and did miracles, it was a sign from God pointing to life. But many people hate what Jesus did and said. What do they hate? Unbelievers actually hate the gospel. Think about it: the gospel says that God does it all for you. The gospel says that Jesus was perfect in your place and he paid for all your sins and you are forgiven. Why would anyone hate that? Because in their minds they add a little bit to it: Jesus did all those things for you, *you miserable, rotten sinner*. Jesus forgives you, *but you don’t deserve it*. That’s true, but it’s never the way Jesus actually says it. Finally, the need to be forgiven offends people. I remember once I was involved in a conflict and everyone in the conflict claimed to follow Christ. At one point, I said that I forgave one of the other people. And I was told that it was offensive to do that, because I was saying they were wrong. That’s what unbelievers hear when we tell them they’re forgiven. They don’t think they need to be forgiven, so they certainly don’t think that Jesus has anything to offer them. So they fall all the way into hell. Jesus did a better job of offering forgiveness and life than you and I ever will. And the vast majority of the people who listened to him hated his message. And they spoke against it.

The key is that they didn’t like the gospel because they didn’t like the law. They didn’t like hearing that they did need God’s forgiveness. In all of Scripture, no one preached God’s law more powerfully than Jesus did. Why? Because you can’t forgive someone who isn’t repentant. The soul that’s broken and guilty longs to be forgiven. Jesus came to knock us off our high horses and force us to realize that we’re covered with mud and we need to be washed clean. So he never hesitated to preach the law and most people hated him for that.

That wasn’t just something Jesus did back then. Jesus still has to knock us down, so that we understand how much we need him to avoid falling all the way into hell. You and I need to confront the fact that we’re sinners. So many of the problems in our lives – the problems we blame on other people – really are our own fault or they’re made worse by our own sinful reactions to those things. And even when it’s true that other people are totally responsible for everything bad that’s happened in our lives, it’s also true that we were born sinners, born enemies of God, born selfish and self-righteous and we deserve whatever bad things happen to us, and far more. We deserve God’s punishment in hell forever. No one wants to hear that.

But Jesus didn’t come to tell us what we want to hear. He came to tell us the truth so that he can save us. So yes, he does knock us down. He does cause us to fall. And if you’ve managed to skate through your churchgoing existence without ever feeling guilty, without ever feeling like this was all striking too close to home, then one of us is not doing our job. Either I’m not doing a good enough job preaching the law. Or you’re not doing a good enough job listening. Do you see yourself in the sinners God shows us here? Do you recognize just how close to hell we all come as we roll along through this life, doing what we want to do, and then blaming everyone else for anything that goes wrong? If you don’t, then you are danger of not just falling here, but falling all the way into hell.

II.

Sadly, for far too many people, causing them to fall is the last thing Jesus does for them. They hear and reject his words and they condemn themselves. They stick their fingers in their ears – sometimes even literally – and block out the whole message of Christ with their own self-justifications and delusions. Jesus will not offer forgiveness to a person who will not acknowledge their sin. But that’s not how Jesus ever wants the conversation to end. He does cause us to fall. But he’s right there to pick us up again. My friends, **what does Jesus do to you? Does he cause you to rise?**

That’s what Simeon promised as he saw Jesus’ whole life: **“the falling and rising of many in Israel.”** Jesus didn’t actually come to knock people down into the mud. From his perspective, everyone is already there. He just forces us to see that. He came to pick us up. He came to drag us out of hell itself. He came to free us from the power of sin and death and the devil. He did that first for Israel. For fifteen hundred years, God sent prophet after prophet who revealed details about the coming Savior so that Israel would recognize him when he came. Now, one more prophet was talking about the glory of Israel. What was that glory? Lifting sinners out of the mud and making them God’s own children.

And Jesus is the light for us Gentiles. He lifted us out of the mud by living here in the mud with us. He saw sin every single day. He saw what sin does to people. He saw how we blame others and make excuses and ruin our own lives and the lives of the people around us. And he lived a better life, a perfect life. He even kept all those Old Testament laws that to us seem strange and even pointless. Jesus lived for God. He lived the life God calls us to live so that God could give us the credit. Then Jesus died. He suffered all that we owe – death and hell itself – on that cross. He paid and we are free. He rose to say that we are forgiven for every sin we ever committed. We are forgiven for every time we blamed someone else and made excuses. We are forgiven for every fault that ever knocked us off our high horses and filled our hearts with guilt. We are forgiven for all the horrible words and actions we wish we could take back, or at least forget. We are forgiven and we will live with him forever.

III.

That’s what Jesus did *for* us. When we hear that, what does he do *to* us? He gives and strengthens our faith. We trust in his love and we find comfort in sorrow, joy even in this sin-filled world. But there is another side of it here, and Simeon underlined that reality for Mary. **What does Jesus do to you? Does he cause a sword to pierce your soul?**

Simeon said, **“And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”** Mary would see her son die the most horrible death in history. She had a unique role to play in our salvation. Since ancient times, the church has called her “the mother of God.” While the Catholic Church goes way too far in claiming that she had no sin and that we should pray to her, we can’t lose sight of the unique contribution she made. Jesus was a real human being. The Son of God was made man. He lived like we do. He grew and learned and got tired and hungry, like every other human being. Mary was the person God used to make his Son human – that’s where Jesus got his DNA. God called her to carry him in her womb and to love him and care for him until he began his ministry and his march to the cross and the empty tomb. God chose a woman of faith to do those things. God chose a woman who loved her Son. When he told her this and so many other things, she stored it all up in her heart. How much did she actually understand? We won’t know until we reach heaven. But God called her to walk that road and God told her that it would hurt.

You and I didn’t hold that baby in our arms or care for him. We didn’t watch Jesus grow up. And we didn’t have to watch him die, even though we go back to cross every year in Lent. There simply is no way we can put ourselves in Mary’s place. But at the same time, there is always a price to following Jesus. The sinful world opposes all that Jesus is and does. It pushes back against us and it often inflicts pain on us. The devil tortures us with guilt because we disappoint our Savior, with temptation because our sinful hearts want to do what everyone else is doing and even with doubt. Are all the sacrifices really worth it? Am I throwing my life away? It’s not the same as what Mary suffered. But following Jesus in a sinful world does hurt.

But our comfort is not Mary. It’s Jesus himself. Jesus carries us through the pain, just like he did for his mother, but repeating his promises to us. Jesus attends our every need, just like he did on the cross when he asked his best friend to take care of his mother. Jesus solves all our problems in his resurrection. Just like he returned to life and lifted up his mother’s heart, so he will lift our hearts, too. We might not see it until we reach heaven, but he will heal and restore us. Until we reach that day, he will send his Spirit into our hearts to

preserve us in the faith. That's why God gives us all these pictures of Jesus. Every single one is different way for us to know our Savior and learn the love that he has for us. That love will never fail us. Amen.