

Israel's glory

by Stuart Olyott

I want to tell you about one eventful day in the life of an otherwise unknown man.

I suppose I ought to begin at the beginning, but I'm sorry, I can't do that. This is because Luke, although an accurate historian, didn't tell us everything.

The event took place in Jerusalem. To be more precise, it happened in the temple there, when the tiny Jesus was exactly forty days old. Jerusalem is a little under six miles (nine kilometres) from Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, and I suppose Mary, Joseph and the baby spent most of the morning on the road.

Jesus was Mary's first baby. What is more important is that he was her first baby boy. Every Jew in those days knew that the child would have to be formally presented to the Lord on that day.

A five-shekel 'redemption price' would need to be paid for him, and two sacrifices would have to be made. In all normal circumstances the sacrifices would be a lamb and a dove or young pigeon.

But if the family was desperately poor, two doves or two pigeons would do. And this is what Joseph and Mary offered.

A stranger

As they entered the temple, the first person they met was a complete stranger — a man called Simeon. Whether he was old or young, we do not know. In first-century Palestine there were as many Simeons as there are Johns today, so there was nothing special about his name.

There have been many attempts to guess which Simeon it was that Luke was writing about, but nobody has been able to speak with any certainty. The man who was a stranger to Joseph and Mary remains a stranger to us.

All we know is that he was a very moral and spiritually-minded man who knew God intimately. Because of this — and presumably because he studied the Scriptures — he knew that the long-awaited Messiah would be revealed to Israel at any moment.

The Messiah, of course, was the promised Saviour, whom the Old Testament prophets had been talking about for centuries.

Those who understood the Scriptures knew roughly when the Messiah would come, where he would be born and brought up, what he would preach, how and where he would die and rise again, and what would happen after his resurrection.

Predictions

Those Old Testament Scriptures had been written by God-appointed prophets. But how had they been able to give such detailed predictions? Because they had been revealed to them personally by the Holy Spirit.

Something similar had happened to Simeon. It had been revealed to him that he would not die until he had personally set his eyes on the Lord Christ. One of Simeon's languages was Greek, and in Greek 'Christ' means 'Messiah'.

Simeon knew, therefore, that the Messiah would arrive during his lifetime. Not only that, but the Holy Spirit had somehow made it clear that he was to go to the temple on a certain day at a certain time.

As he did so, his heart must have been filled with expectancy.

A poem

There, entering the temple precincts, was a poverty-stricken couple with a baby almost six weeks old! Before anything else could happen, Simeon took the baby in his arms and spoke to God in worshipful verse:

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
According to your word;
For my eyes have seen your salvation
Which you have prepared before the face of all peoples,
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of your people Israel.

Mary had already been told that the baby she would conceive by the Holy Spirit's miraculous intervention was not only the promised Messiah, but the eternal God taking on human flesh.

Quite independently, Joseph had been shown that his virgin bride was carrying 'God with us', the Saviour of sinners.

Finally, after the birth, shepherds had told them both that angels had spoken of the baby as 'a Saviour, Christ the Lord'.

But this did not lessen the young couple's amazement at Simeon's prayer of thanks. For now there was mention of their baby being 'salvation' for 'all peoples'! He had come not just for Israel, but also for the Gentiles!

A prophecy

Continuing to pray, Simeon called down God's blessing on the young parents in front of him. He looked Mary straight in the eyes and spoke again. There was something solemn in his tone that you could only describe as a note of warning.

He looked down the future years and told Mary things that, all too soon, she would discover for herself.

Her son, he said, would cause many high people in Israel to be brought low, and many low people to be raised up. She lived long enough to see him denounce the hypocrisy of the most respected people in their religious society, and promise forgiveness and eternal life to sinners — to every prostitute, cheat, crook and failure who would turn from their old life to trust in himself and his Heavenly Father.

A piercing

Her son, he said, would be 'a sign to be spoken against', and 'a sword would pierce through her own heart' also. She lived long enough to see him hated by many — who could not bear the thought that he might be who he said he was.

And she felt the sword-thrust when she saw him naked, bleeding and dying on a cross. He was just thirty-three, and it must have broken her heart.

As a result of her son's coming, Simeon said, 'the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed'. After he had risen from the dead, she had the joyful experience of meeting him many times.

Ten days after his return to heaven, she was one of those into whose hearts he sent his Spirit — as the Christian church was born. Then, as that church spread its message throughout the world, she saw men and women everywhere taking sides for and against her son.

She lived long enough to see perfectly clearly that a person's thoughts about Christ reveal exactly what sort of person they are.

Mary never forgot Simeon. Later in her life, she told Luke about him. And Luke told us (Luke 2:22-35).