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Luke 2:21-40

The miracle of the virgin birth has taken place. In this miracle, God, the creator of humanity, has become humanity. In doing so, He has demonstrated His great love for us, and even more, He has glorified Himself. Let us be in awe of Him, that His justice is so pure and holy, that it demanded He do this in order to bring us salvation. How terrifying hell must be for those who reject such marvelous grace displayed by God.

Both Matthew and Luke give a synopsis of the birth of Christ and of some of the time following. While they have different goals in what they write, and cover different aspects of Jesus’ early childhood, the two accounts fit together.

So far, Luke has told us about the announcements by angels of the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus. He tells us of the reactions of all the parents involved. The reactions are quite varied, but they ultimately end up in obedience. Neither birth is possible without divine intervention.

God the Son, through whom everything was created, was born in humble circumstances: in a stable to poor parents. Not even in Jerusalem. God then saw fit to make a glorious announcement; He used an angelic spokesman who was accompanied by an army of angels who sang in praise and worship of God. This announcement was made, not to kings and priests, but to shepherds; not in a palace or temple, but in a field. God showed Himself to be within reach of even the lowliest, if only they will reach out to Jesus.

Our reading for today begins by mentioning the circumcision of Jesus. Back in Genesis 17:12, God commanded Abraham to circumcise every male child at the age of eight days. As we see in the birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus, this is also when their name was formally bestowed upon them. God’s command to circumcise boy babies was also given in the Law of Moses and is stated in Leviticus 12:3.

This is important because it shows what Paul tells us in Galatians 4:4 and 5: “*God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law*.” Circumcision was the sign of being under the covenant that God made with Abraham and also, the Mosaic covenant, the covenant of the Law. So, Jesus submitted to circumcision, which means the He submitted to keeping the Law given to Moses.

Now you might say that Jesus was only an eight-day old infant, He didn’t have any choice in the matter of receiving circumcision. But remember that Jesus existed as God the Son from eternity past. He chose to be born and live in accordance with the Law. And He did it in order to save those who were under the Law. They needed saving, because no one can keep the Law. And once someone submits to the Law, they have to keep every little part of it. As Paul says in Galatians 5:3, “*And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law*.” And so, during His life on earth, Jesus kept the whole Law; so that all who call upon Him can be forgiven.

He was given the name Jesus, which is the name commanded by the angel. Jesus is the Greek form of the name we call Joshua. This name come from the Hebrew word meaning “deliverance” or “salvation”. What better name for the Saviour of the world.

The Old Testament Law requires at least two witnesses and throughout this account we see the two witnesses provided several times. Also, these two witnesses provide a deeper understanding of what Jesus is about.

While Jesus or Joshua were common names among the Jews, there are two outstanding forerunners in the Old Testament. And they tell us something about Jesus. The first is Joshua the son of Nun, who led Israel after Moses died. He was a commander and a warrior. Prophecy tells us that Jesus will rule all the nations in the Father’s timing. We also know from the book of Revelation that at Jesus’ second advent, He will come as a warrior, and mercilessly pour out the wrath of God on unregenerate humanity.

Just as Joshua was to leave no survivors of the Canaanite people, Jesus will leave no survivors of the modern-day godless Canaanites. Joshua also led God’s people into the Promised Land, which is exactly what Jesus came to do. Like Joshua, Jesus is to be the ruler.

We read of the other Joshua later who is Joshua the son of Jehozadak. This Joshua was a priest who came back to Israel once the captives were released from Babylon. This Joshua is spoken of in the historical books of Nehemiah and Ezra, but also in the prophetic books of Haggai and Zechariah.

Zechariah has a vision in which Joshua the high priest, is clothed in filthy rags and accosted by satan. But by the command of the Lord, He is given clean clothes and satan is rebuked. Likewise, Jesus would bear our filthy sins and be accosted by satan. But as our high priest, Jesus atones for our sins and leaves satan without accusation.

These two forerunners witness to Jesus as ruler and high priest. He is the one who leads us into the Promised Land of the new heavens and the new earth. He is our mediator before God and against satan, and our redeemer who has purchased us from the condemnation of sin.

While verse 21 took place when Jesus was eight days old, verse 22 begins about 40 days after His birth and there are two separate events taking place. The one involves purification, particularly of Mary; the other involves presenting a first-born child who is male to the Lord.

The days of purification that were completed were according to Leviticus 12. Leviticus 12 gives the law concerning a woman who has given birth. Giving birth put a woman into a state of ritual uncleanness, primarily due to the issue of blood. With the birth of a male child, the woman remained unclean for forty days. Once the forty days had passed, she was to bring a sacrifice to the temple.

The sacrifice consisted of a lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering. If a person could not afford a lamb, they could bring two birds instead. We see from verse 24 that Mary and Joseph were poor because they brought two birds. This has taken place before the visit of the wise men, so they didn’t have the gifts they brought to them yet.

In verse 22 it says “their” purification; plural. This probably means Mary and Joseph. Joseph would have been unclean because of his close proximity to Mary. Being born did not make one unclean. Jesus did not need purified because He was not unclean; He was never unclean.

Mary had to go through purification because she gave birth to Jesus. But eventually, it was Jesus who actually purified her. Mary was a sinner just like the rest of us. The sacrifices she offered were only able to cover her sins, not remove them. Jesus’ sacrifice was sufficient to remove them.

The second event taking place here is the presentation of Jesus to the Lord. After the tenth plague hit Egypt, the death of all the first born, God declared to Israel that all the firstborn males, of people and of animals were His. In Exodus 13 and in Numbers 18 it is spelled out what this means.

The firstborn males of all clean animals were to be sacrificed to the Lord. There was no way around this, the sacrifice had to take place. I think we see here a picture of the necessity of sacrifice of the innocent in God’s great plan of salvation. Jesus was perfect and perfectly innocent, yet there was no way around sacrificing Him for the salvation of people, which is what we learn from the Garden of Gethsemane.

If an unclean male animal was born, such as a donkey, it could not be sacrificed. Either its neck was broken or it was redeemed by sacrificing a lamb in its place. Again, a picture for us of God’s justice and mercy. If a person dies in their sin, then they must accept the punishment themselves. This is an eternity in the lake of fire. Or, God offers a chance for redemption. Jesus was sacrificed in our place, and if we accept Him then our eternal lives are spared.

Obviously, God did not accept human sacrifice; this was an abhorrence to Him. So, all firstborn male people had to be redeemed. Originally, a baby born to the tribe of Levi could serve as a redemption. All the males born to Levi were dedicated entirely to the Lord, so for each baby boy born in Levi, he would take the place of a firstborn male in the other tribes.

But there weren’t enough in the tribe of Levi to take the place of all the males of the other tribes, so a redemption price of five shekels was established by God in Numbers 18:16. This is what was taking place in our verses in Luke 2. Verse 23 reminds us that every male that opens the womb was holy to the Lord; and verse 27 refers to them carrying out the custom of the Law. Jesus was brought to the temple and the five shekels were paid.

Again, as Paul stated in Galatians 4, Jesus was born under the Law, so all these things had to take place. But, of course, Jesus is also the fulfillment of the Law. In Jesus, the circumcision of the foreskin is no longer necessary because He brought about a circumcision of the heart. He also established a new covenant in His blood. The sign of physical circumcision was no longer needed; the sign of the new covenant is the indwelling Holy Spirit, a sign for both men and women.

The animal sacrifices were no longer needed, because of His perfect sacrifice. Sin offerings are not necessary because our sin is gone in Christ. Peace offerings aren’t needed because Jesus established peace between us and God. No other sacrifice is needed because we are covered in Jesus’ righteousness, so the Father is pleased to hear us directly; we can thank Him from our knees, we can petition Him, we can intercede on behalf of others. Jesus accomplished all.

Going back to verse 23, “*(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”).*” I think it is significant that Luke doesn’t say “the Law of Moses”; he says “the Law of the Lord”. Now certainly, the Law that was given through Moses came from God, it was the Law of the Lord. But here something is different.

Each boy baby born had a special ceremony to dedicate him to God, but he would be redeemed from total service by the five-shekel price. All of Israel was called to be holy to the Lord. This holiness meant that they were set apart; they were to serve God and be different from all the other people groups in the world. In Exodus 19:5 and 6 God says, “*if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’*”

God wanted His people to be holy; all of them regardless of whether their occupation was in the priesthood or a farmer. But they failed. Even the priests could not keep the Law and many became corrupt. There were many who came to understand that faith was the necessary means to salvation and were thereby saved; but none had the righteousness required by God. They could not keep the Law of Moses.

Now we have Jesus. He is human; but He is also the second person of the Trinity manifest. He completely fulfills the Law. He was born a baby boy, the first to proceed from Mary’s womb. And He was perfectly holy to the Lord. He fulfilled the Law of the Lord.

Now those of us who accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord, have all our sins forgiven, and we are covered in His righteousness. So we are holy to the Lord. We are also citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and as those citizens we serve God; which is the function of priests. The work of Jesus has made we who are Christians into *a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*.

We will continue our study of this section next week. But as you begin a new year, consider that we are one year closer to the return of our Lord and King. When He comes back, will you be found a worthy servant, active in priestly service, in the world, yet holy?

Prayer

Merciful God, Your word proves itself over and again. The more we look the more we see how all of Your Law told us about the Christ. Your Law was prophecy. Your Law revealed who You are but in a shadowy way. Jesus came and gave clear revelation of You. Jesus, like You, is holy, just, kind, and merciful. He never changed in His teaching, as You are unchanging God.

How precious Jesus, that You were willing to leave the glory and perfection of heaven, to become one of Your creation. We are not worthy of You. Created good by God, we chose to turn from Him and seek our own way. Our own way leads to nothing but sadness and death. In our rebellion, these are what we deserve. But God is merciful.

Thank You Jesus for Your perfect fulfillment of the Law. Only You, of all persons of the earth, have the righteousness to stand before God. Yet You bestowed that righteousness upon us. You have made us to be adopted sons and daughters of almighty God. He is truly our Father. It is with grateful hearts, that we come before You Father, and thank You for Jesus.

For it is in His name we pray

Amen