

The Great Divide

a study of **Luke 2:21-38** by David Shelley

The Big Idea: **Jesus' presence calls for a response that is essential, but not easy.**

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The Great Divide

Those who follow Jesus usually think that is a decision that has already been made—no turning back. And it is true that Jesus is the Savior now and forever.

But given enough time, life shows us that following Him in faith is not always that simple. We find ourselves at a crossroads, unsure which way to go. Usually those are times when none of the options looks good—when, to be honest, we didn't want to be here at all.

I think of friends whom I love who have suffered terrible loss this year. They never expected to be going through the holidays with so much grief. They never wanted to be struggling over how to move forward. Faith itself is not as easily defined when you're that disoriented—especially when the people who used to encourage your faith are no longer speaking into your present circumstances. Sometimes it feels as if a blade has pierced right through you, and you're struggling to know how to trust all over again.

Living in Colorado, we are vividly aware of the great Continental Divide, the high point that separates all that flows toward the Pacific from all that flows toward the Atlantic. Most of us have crossed it many times. We've driven over Trailridge road and through the Eisenhower tunnel. The divide is not a straight line, and it isn't always easy to tell which side you're on. But, gravity tells us, the water is destined for one side or the other.

The Bible is the story of our relation to God. And at the center of the story is a Great Divide, the person Jesus Christ. At the high ground of Christ every person either goes one way or the other: with Him to eternal life, or away from Him toward death.

Ultimately, the thing that makes Christianity distinct from any religion or any other world view is the Great Divide: Jesus himself. No religion can duplicate or imitate what Christ has done by coming in person, living in the flesh, mingling with common people, displaying His power to heal physically, relationally and spiritually, dying for us, then proving by his resurrection, to hundreds of eyewitnesses, that He is the Lord of life. Now he offers eternal life through a personal relationship of trust in Him. No religion offers that.

So the question is not ultimately whether you feel it's working for you or not; the question is whether you know this Savior on whose grace all this depends.

All four Gospel writers wrote to make not merely his life and teaching known, but to make *Him* known. The relevance of the entire Bible hinges on Him. If He is who He said He is, and if He did what history says He did, then the most important question for any man, woman or child to answer is: "What are you going to do with Jesus?" Will you know and follow Him, or will you turn away from Him?

Occasionally some religious person has come up to me and tried to get me to consider their belief system. Inevitably I go back to the bottom line of every discussion about ultimate matters: the person Christ Jesus. I ask, "What do you know of Jesus?" When they tell me, "Oh, he was a prophet, a great teacher, a good example," I know that they have never met the true Lord, because the Jesus that I know from the Bible is so much better those descriptions that they aren't worth mentioning.

Luke wrote his Gospel because knowing Jesus is crucial. He makes all the difference. And the question is where I stand and where you stand in relation to Him.

Turn to **Luke 2**, where we will pick up in verse 21 the account of the dedication His parents were making in the temple just after His birth. In this quiet little conversation Luke shows us that **Jesus' presence calls for a response that is essential, but not easy.**

²¹ 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.

²² 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."^[e]

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 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. 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 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."

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 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.^[e] 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.

Eight days after Mary gave birth, she and Joseph took the baby to Jerusalem. One of the benefits of being in Bethlehem at the time of the birth, rather than 80 miles north in Nazareth, is that they were now a morning's walk from the capital city, and from the temple. They would be able to dedicate the child in the temple itself.

Joseph would be meticulous in following the law. Luke quotes it and reminds us three times in verses **21-24** that they were doing so. And again in verse **39** Luke shows that this faith in Jesus did not begin among scofflaws, as accusers would claim, but among faithful, God-honoring people.

Their firstborn would be consecrated to the Lord. According to the law they would offer a sacrifice. As they were not wealthy enough to purchase a lamb, their sacrifice would be two pigeons.

The aroma of the roasting birds on the altar was mingling with the smell of other sacrifices all round them, and Joseph was just about to pronounce the baby's name: Y'shua, "the Lord saves," a name passed on to us as "Joshua" and then "Jesus."

“I am Joseph,” the father might be saying, “son of Jacob, the son of Matthan, the son of Eleazar, who descended from our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as from David and Solomon. . .”

But even as Joseph is speaking, an aged saint approaches the couple in wonder. More with motions than with words, he indicates his desire to hold the child. Being the outsiders here, and never having done this themselves, Joseph and Mary defer to the old man Simeon.

“Hallelu-jah,” repeats the stranger again and again. Then he prays some amazing words: “Sovereign Lord, you can now release your servant from this life in peace, just as you promised. Because now my eyes have seen your Salvation, which you are bringing out in the open for everyone to see, Your revealing light for the nations that don’t know you, and Your glory given to your people Israel.

Joseph and Mary were stunned at these words, the second such description of this baby in his first eight days, since shepherds had visited their resting place in Bethlehem a week before.

Then Simeon spoke a blessing on the new parents before handing the child back to his mother. But as he did so, he spoke again to Mary. “This child is destined to cause many to rise. But also many will fall. Many will speak out against Him, so God will show what they really are. And the pain will be to you as a sword thrust into your soul.”

Before Mary even had the chance to ask Simeon about his disturbing words, an even more ancient woman spoke up at Mary’s side, pouring out her thanks to the Lord and saying to the people around them, “This child is the hope of all who await the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Joseph realized, perhaps, that such language could be taken as a threat here, so close to Herod’s palace. He would hurry to complete the ceremony, perhaps not savoring it in the way he had imagined, but determined to fulfill everything that the law required, as Mary took the time to ask Simeon and the frail old woman Anna about themselves and what prompted their words.

Luke would have heard about this episode from Mary herself. He would have known about Herod’s actual threats, and about the necessity of the young family’s escape to Egypt. Yet he passes over that chapter of their lives, and includes this interchange with an obscure old man named Simeon and an even more obscure old woman named Anna. Why?

Why does Luke include Simeon and Anna in his Gospel?

Notice how Simeon is described (in verses **25-26**) by three statements:

He was righteous and devout (as in chapter 1 Zechariah and Elizabeth were).

Simeon was not a rebel with anything to gain by overthrowing traditional Judaism. He was a devoted believer, and he recognized Jesus as the Savior he had waited all his life to meet.

He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. In other words, he, unlike many, took the Scriptures seriously. The Lord had promised comfort to His people, and the sending of the Messiah. To Simeon, that made all the difference. He believed the Lord would come. He expected it. He was waiting for it. He would recognize the Lord’s arrival.

The Holy Spirit was on him. Simeon is the fourth person in these first two chapters described as having the **Holy Spirit**. Luke, who is the only author in the Bible to describe the Holy Spirit’s coming at Pentecost (**Acts 2**), seems to be going out of his way to show that the Holy Spirit has been involved in this all along, and that at times God-honoring people were filled with the Holy Spirit before Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit's work is to magnify the person of Christ. Consistently, the Holy Spirit is working to turn our attention to the Savior.

In Simeon's case the Holy Spirit has revealed something very personal and specific (26), namely that he would get to see the Messiah within his lifetime. And it was the Spirit that prompted Him to be go to the Temple that day (27).

How is Anna described (in verses 36-37)? Notice three statements about her.

She was a prophetess. People knew her as one who spoke the truth of God accurately. They had very harsh laws for those who proved false in their prophecy. Anna would be recognized as a credible witness. Luke, who is concerned with historical accuracy, even gives her family pedigree.

She had been a widow for most of her life. In that culture, widows who never remarried generally had no means of income. They had to live on faith, so to speak. People saw them as holy and devout, because they were not striving after their own welfare. This gives Anna extraordinary credibility.

She worshiped in the temple all the time. Anna had the reputation because she lived it. Everyone could see how much time she devoted to prayer and the Scriptures.

So why are Simeon and Anna important in Jesus' story that Luke would mention them?

Because they were some of the best examples of what the Jewish faith was all about. They weren't in it for their own power and prestige. They were the genuine article--people who knew God's words, took them seriously, lived in hope of their fulfillment, devoted their lives to it, and would surely recognize the real thing when it arrived.

You see, when Luke was writing, Jews were falsely accusing Christians of stirring up dissension and unrest. Christians were portrayed publicly as trouble-makers who do not reflect the true faith of Judaism. Luke himself witnessed this all over his travels with Paul, including right here in Jerusalem (eg. Acts 21:27ff.).

Judaism was a protected religion under the Roman government. When Christians, who at this time were predominantly Jews, would teach the fulfillment of prophecy in the synagogues, it was extremely divisive. Sometimes riots would break out. Jewish leaders would tell the officials that the Christian sect was the cause of all the trouble.

But Luke sees that the accusers have it backwards. Jesus did not come and disrupt the true faith. He IS the fulfillment of it. And those who had taken their Scriptures seriously, who truly longed for the coming of the Lord, were the very ones who recognized Him when he arrived.

He wanted to show that truly Godly Jews recognized the Savior when He came. The most devout people in the age of prophecy were the most receptive to the One who fulfills that prophecy.

Luke Gospel shows that the truly faithful welcomed the Savior with open arms (not always without questions, as Zechariah and Mary show in chapter 1), because He is the fulfillment of God's promises and our hopes. But the hypocrites reject and persecute Him.

So Luke goes out of his way to point out some essential details. Joseph and Mary were not scofflaws. They meticulously honored the Jewish laws. And Jesus was not a heretical trouble-maker. He is the very fulfillment of the true faith's longings. People with the faith and character of Simeon and Anna demonstrate that.

But I value this passage even more because it is honest and accurate about the pain and difficulty of trusting the Savior in this messed-up world. Let me explain what I mean.

What is this story telling us?

In Simeon's prophecy I see four key ideas: the **Savior**, the **Light**, the **Divide**, and the **Sword**.

The Savior:

(29-30) "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your **Salvation**."

I read that word "Salvation" with a capital S, because what Simeon's eyes have seen is Jesus, the Savior. He has literally seen Salvation by seeing Jesus and knowing He is the Savior. And he has figuratively seen salvation, because he can see that God's work for the rescue of people all over the world is underway.

But what does this mean to Simeon personally? He says, "Now I can die in peace." Now that I have encountered the Savior for myself, death is not a threat to me. That is the point.

1. Once I have met the Savior, I can die in peace.

This is not an off-hand statement for Simeon, and it is not a pointless statement for Luke to quote. Part of Luke's purpose in writing this Gospel is that he sees faithful people suffering--and sometimes dying--for their faith in Christ.

In his second volume, the book we call "Acts," Luke quotes **Stephen**, as he was about to be killed by stoning, saying, "I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. . . . Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (7:56, 59). Though people violently killed him, Stephen died in peace because He saw Jesus.

John Bunyan wrote "**The Pilgrim's Progress**," for centuries the most widely published book in the world after the Bible. In this allegory, the main character, Christian, faces death in the form of a river. He knows he has to cross the river to see the wonderful city.

As he crosses the river he begins to sink and cries out. But his companion Hopeful reminds him that these troubles are not because God has forsaken him, but to remind him of God's goodness which he has already received, so that he lives with Jesus even in distresses.

And with hopeful's reminder, Christian shouted out, "Oh, I see Him again! And He tells me, 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with Thee.'"

Bunyan illustrates the experience of everyone who fixes their eyes on Jesus and finds peace, even in death.

To anyone who has *never* encountered Christ personally, Simeon's statement sounds morbid. But knowing Christ personally makes all the difference in the world. Death itself is not really a threat to those who have assurance in the Savior.

Many have written how in the days just before the invasion of Normandy, many in the invasion force were seeking out chaplains, eager to know how they could be ready to meet the Lord. Why? Because they knew thousands of them would not survive the battle. When death is staring you in the face, there is no assurance in philosophical theories, or in the hope that you have lived a good life. You want to know where you stand with the Lord.

So Simeon's statement poses a crucial question:

Are you ready to face death in peace? Once you've met Christ for yourself, and you know you can trust Him, **Jesus' presence makes all the difference.** That doesn't mean we don't have questions. Of course we will wrestle to understand how God could work good through our suffering. But because we know the Savior, we can know that somehow He will.

What does Simeon talk about next?

The Light:

(30-32) "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."

Jesus is the light by which we see what God is really like. Jesus is the most vivid display of who God really is. He is how we know the God of the Bible.

Jesus, Simeon claims, is the true glory of Israel. He is the true Savior that will vindicate God's people. Luke recognizes this as an important claim to make, as these believing Jews are under attack by their unbelieving brothers.

But the other part of Simeon's statement is even more radical. The Savior is here for all people to see, and He is the Light to reveal God to all the nations! "Gentiles," you see, simply translates the Greek word "ethnics," meaning the nations who had not yet met the living God.

2. While Christ is the glory is Israel, He is the light to reveal God to all peoples.

Many Jews had come to think that God was their private domain, ignoring the testament of their own Scriptures for two millennia. The Lord had told Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed.

The Great Divide is not whether you are Jewish or not, whether you have the right pedigree or status. The Great Divide is your relation to the Savior.

Luke is saying, "Although many of my contemporary Jews are denying it, those faithful to God know that His Salvation is available to people of every race and nation.

Luke would go on in this volume to report Jesus' death and His resurrection. Then at the beginning of the second volume (in **Acts 1**), it is Luke who would quote Jesus' great commission: "When you have received my Holy Spirit you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea (the land of the Jews), and across the cultural barrier into Samaria, and all over the world to the ends of the earth." Luke goes on to show how upset the Jews were that other nationalities were meeting Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit.

The great news for you and me is that the Savior is available to us. From where *they* were standing, *we* live in the ends of the earth. Very few of us are Jewish. Few of us have ever set foot in Jerusalem. We have personal access to the Savior no matter who we are or where we've come from. He offers to give you His Holy Spirit to dwell inside you, so you can know Him and the power of His salvation. That is how God wants you to know Him--not as a concept, but in person.

Do you hear the invitation? Are you receptive to the light of Jesus?

Don't assume that this is something that happened a long time ago. God is still making Himself known right now. Jesus is the light of revelation to all people. You are invited to be close to Him.

But as truly good as that is, in this world it is not easy. It is not as simple as saying, "Everybody is saved." Because in this world, many people are not receptive to Jesus. **Jesus is not only the Savior; he is also a divide that many refuse to cross.**

Look at what Simeon says next:

The Divide:

(verses **34-35**) “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.”

In other words, not everyone will receive this Savior.

3. Although the good news is for everyone, people will divide over Him.

While Jesus comes to raise people up, and that offer is there for everyone, many will reject Him. Many will speak against Him, and in the process, where their hearts really are will be revealed. Many will fall.

This offer is universal, it won't be universally received. Some people are going to reject Jesus, either by overtly opposing Him, or by seeking to diminish His place in their lives. Some people say, “I like some of His teachings, but not His claim to be Lord,” showing that they don't know or trust Him.

One of the biggest struggles of my life was over whether to get married. For me up to that point, marriage was only a concept--until Lorie came into my life. Once I was aware of Lorie, and the kind of person she was, and the role she wanted to have in my life, there was no neutral. I was either going to make the commitment OR reject her as my partner for life. I agonized over whether I could make the commitment, but the decision had to be made. There was no fence to straddle.

Because of her undying commitment to me, Lorie is the best picture of Jesus I have known. In the most practical way I can imagine, I have learned from her the difference between merely liking someone (or even loving someone!) and having a covenant relationship. I am not good at loving Lorie, but I cannot deny the relationship or the reality of how it has changed me.

The same is true in a relationship with Jesus. I am not good at loving Him, but I can't deny his reality and the comprehensive change he has made in my life. He is the true Savior. There is no middle ground, no neutral zone. You either profess Him as Lord and live by His grace, or you deny Him as your Life-Giver and refuse to trust his salvation.

Simeon foresees not only the Salvation, but also the rejection of it. He sees that Jesus is the ultimate dividing line, separating those who will receive Him from those who don't. The thoughts of the hearts will be revealed. **Jesus' presence calls for a response that is essential, but not easy.**

Simeon stresses to Mary that the way of salvation involves a wound.

The Sword:

Simeon sees that this makes things more difficult for those who are involved in God's plan of salvation. As He puts it to Mary, “A sword will pierce your own soul.” In a world that rejects the Savior, going with Him will mean times of pain, like a sword thrust through your soul.

4. Those who join Jesus will find this division painful.

Jesus will be spoken against, and you'll have to decide for yourself whether to go with Jesus with so much peril ahead.

Mary is told, at the beginning of the journey, that the road ahead will include the sword. She will experience the dividing line in her own life. Among other things, she will be there at the foot of the cross, watching her son and her Lord die in agony, while people around her shout insults.

Those of us who acknowledge who Jesus really is, who trust Him with our lives, are often surprised that in following Him we encounter opposition. But the Bible is very honest about that. We can expect some to reject Him, and it will at times mean pain for us.

Jesus said the world will hate you because you are not of this world any more than He was. And He prayed not that we be taken out of the world, but that we not be given over to the evil one (**John 17:14-15**).

Those of us who know the difference know how deeply it cuts when someone--especially someone you care about very much--rejects the Lord who has saved you.

If you have been avoiding the Savior, and someone who loves you knows Him, probably two things are taking place: that person is hurting for you, and that person is pleading with the Lord to overcome your wall of resistance and embrace you into the covenant of eternal life.

Jesus' presence calls for a response that is essential, but not easy.

So is the way of salvation rewarding? Absolutely. Upon meeting the Savior, Simeon knew fulfillment awaited him. But he also knew that the journey involves pain. And for me, at least, those like Simeon—who are both hopeful and honest about the difficulty—make it significantly easier to trust that Jesus will get me there, even when I can't see which direction to go.

Author Barbara Taylor tells about vacationing on the barrier islands off the coast of South Carolina. It was the time of year when **loggerhead turtles** were laying their eggs. Loggerheads are huge, 300-pound sea turtles.

One night as Barbara sat on the sand, listening to the waves breaking against the shore, she saw a large female turtle drag herself onto the beach, dig a pit in the warm sand with her hind flippers (or legs--whatever you call sea turtle appendages), and deposit her eggs. Barbara was fascinated, but this took a long time and, not wanting to startle or disturb the turtle, she quietly slipped away to go to bed.

Early the next morning, she made her way down to the beach, curious to find where the turtle had laid the eggs. She found the turtle tracks very clearly, but was alarmed to notice them headed in the wrong direction. Instead of going back into the ocean, the labor-exhausted mother had apparently lost her bearings and wandered into the hot sand dunes where she would certainly die.

Barbara followed the tracks and soon found the turtle, partially covered with hot dry sand. Thinking quickly, she brought seaweed and sea water to cover the turtle, then ran to find the park ranger.

The ranger, obviously knowing what he was doing, wasted no time. He came rumbling up in his jeep, flipped the turtle over on her back, and pulled chains out of the back of the vehicle. He then attached the chains to the turtle's front flippers, hooked the chains around the hitch on the back of the jeep, and began to drive rather rapidly back to the water's edge.

They were moving so fast the turtle's head bent back and her mouth filled with sand. Barbara thought, "He's going to kill that turtle." But the opposite was taking place. At the

ocean's edge he unhooked her, flipped her over, and stood patiently watching as she lay unmoving.

Then as the water lapped around her, cleaning off the dry sand, she began to move, very slowly at first. Then as the water was deep enough she pushed off and disappeared beneath the waves.

Barbara Taylor writes, "Watching her swim slowly away and remembering her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noticed that sometimes it is hard to tell whether you are being killed or being saved by the hands that turn your life upside down." (Leadership, Spring 1992)

Sometimes, when your life is upside down, it's hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved.

Part of what attracts me again and again to the Bible is that it gives me testimonies of people who were delivered--not always FROM the peril. Often they were delivered THROUGH the peril. In the midst of it, they wondered why God did this to them. Hindsight revealed that He was not taking them to their death, but from it.

An ordeal in your life is always an opportunity--to fight against the Savior, or to entrust yourself to Him.

Here He is, Jesus, the Great Divide. Which direction are you going to take?

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Introduction: the Great Divide

Why does Luke include Simeon and Anna in his narrative?

Simeon

**was a faithful believer
was expecting the coming of the Savior
had the Holy Spirit**

Anna

**was a prophetess
lived by faith
was evidently faithful**

The Message:

- 1. The Savior: Once I have met Jesus, I can die in peace.**
- 2. The Light: While Christ is the glory is Israel,
He is the light to reveal God to all peoples.**
- 3. The Divide: Although the good news is for everyone,
people will divide over Him.**
- 4. The Sword: Those who join Jesus will find this division painful.**