

Characters Of Christmas

Finding Spiritual Significance Among The Insignificant

An Expository Study of Select Gospel Texts

Written By

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After graduating from Azusa Pacific University and getting married all in the same month of May 1980, I, as a newlywed, picked up a book by the now late Dr. Francis Schaeffer titled *No Little People*. The last sentence of the second paragraph of the first opening chapter captured my mind and my heart: *With God there are no little people*. You might need to read that again, you who think you are insignificant this Christmas season; you who think you don't have much to contribute to God's church and God's kingdom; you who think that others around you are so gifted you should just sit on the spiritual sidelines. You, however, need to reconsider the good doctor's timeless and biblical premise: *With God there are no little people*. That includes you, especially this Christmas season for the Lord of glory came to earth for you. Jaw dropping, for sure. Motivating, without a doubt.

Looking back over my life this Christmas, and keeping Dr. Schaeffer's words in mind, I can't help but see their intrinsic truth and worth. Some of the most influential people in my personal life are names you'd never hear or know. And since my parents drilled into me and my two sisters, Marla and Julie, the need to respect adults, the names I'll share with you now are mostly last names of "insignificant" adults because I was never permitted to use their first names.

- Mrs. Kristoferson, a former missionary to Latin American who was my third grade Sunday School teacher. When I struggled with reading, she stayed with me after class on Sunday mornings and help me learn to read the

- Scripture and the lessons. I'll never forget that white-haired, loved-filled eyed old woman.
- Mrs. Reynolds, another white-haired senior citizen who typically gave me books to read after church while I worked my way through High School. I still have one she said I needed to read on the Seers (Prophets) of Israel. She said it would challenge and change me, and she was right.
 - Thom Dworkis, a former Marine who enjoyed a career as a Pharmacist. As an active Navigator with a fine mind, Thom challenged my thinking in High School while he got me engaged in memorizing Scripture. On one occasion, I rode with Thom from El Centro, California on the border to Sacramento in the north part of the state to see his family. We left late one night and talked about theological concepts for the *entire* nine hour drive.
 - Duane Kepner, a missionary to Mexico in my home church in El Centro who challenged me on day to join him for ministry in dusty, dirty part of Mexicali. Later he challenged me to lead my own ministry to my own village and preach and teach. I'll never forget those days of sharing the Word and the gospel through various translators and seeing souls saved and saints matured. Truly exciting.

Though all these people in my life were obscure, ordinary, seemingly run-of-the-mill believers, in the Lord's eyes they were characters who accomplished His grand, molding and shaping purposes in my life, purposes to help me be what God had called me to be. I can't tell you how often I think of them ... and thank God for them. I'm sure you have your own stories to tell of the little people God has used in a big fashion in your own life. Don't they bring a smile to your face? Aren't you thankful for them? Admit it: You are who you are as a saint because of their presence, influence, and mentoring ... and they were, for all intents and purposes just little people. But in God's eyes they were big people, with big life purposes which still echo down the halls of our lives.

Such, really, is the message of Christmas. The Lord of glory didn't employ the famous, the extremely powerful, the fabulously wealthy to prepare the world for the birth of His Son and our Savior, Jesus. No. He purposefully used little people. Believe me, 2,000 Christmases later, God still uses little people to do His bidding, little people like you and me.

As we step into this glorious, exciting time of year, the time when we remember the birth of the Messiah, I can think of nothing more important than to study the insignificant characters of Christmas, characters who, though opaque by worldly standards, teach us much about what God requires of us during this season of Christological celebration. First up is a man who flashes like a lightning bolt on the pages of the book of Luke. His name and his message?

Simeon: A Man Looking For The Lord (Luke 2:21-35)

Dr. Luke sets up our educational encounter with this godly saint with this familiar exert from Christ's infant life:

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 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.”

Joseph and Mary, according to God’s law given expressly to Moses, obediently sought her purification and Christ’s consecration, as their firstborn, to God (Exodus 13:2, 12; 13:11-16; 22:29-30; Leviticus 27:26-27; Numbers 3:13; 8:17-18). Leviticus 12 laid out how a new mother should seek ritual purification from the contamination of blood associated with birth:

Luke 2:25–26 (NIV)

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² “Say to the Israelites: ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. ³ On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. ⁴ Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. ⁵ If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding. ⁶ “‘When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. ⁷ He shall offer them before the LORD to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. “‘These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. ⁸ But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean’ ” (Leviticus 12).

Birth was not sinful to God, but the discharge post-birth was because it contained blood and dead matter, and the latter was intrinsically associated with sin. Ritual cleansing by means of prescribed and acceptable sacrifices, therefore, was required before a holy God to restore the unclean one. God’s view of sin and its contagious nature runs counter to that of our culture, does it not? Would that we could wrap our minds around the severity of sin and the ultimate need for the proper divine provision via sacrifice for the atonement, or payment, for sin.

Why the time variance between a baby boy and a girl? Forty days of uncleanness for a boy and 80 for a girl. Thinking minds want to know. We don’t know for sure, but it probably had something to do with the fact that the baby girl would one day be subjected to ritual impurity as her body prepared itself for having a child starting in her teens.

All of this is most interesting. Mary sought ceremonial purification from the contagion of sin through the sacrifice of two turtle doves, the divine provision for the poor, while, at the same time, she had given birth to the only One who would/could provide inner and eternal purification of all sin. How intriguing are the ways of God. They, who were physically poor, gave birth to He who was, and is, spiritually rich. What a significant work of God in the lives of a seemingly insignificant couple, with an admittedly obscure little Jewish boy, with the common name of ... Jesus.

So, thirty-three days after Christ's circumcision to identify Him, the Messiah, with the chosen people of God, Israel, Joseph and Mary ventured up to the temple to secure divinely proscribed purification. Their providential encounter with a man they had never met would prove to not only impact their lives in relation to the life their firstborn son would lead, but it would impact ours as well. In way what? Yes, in what way would this unknown, commoner called Simeon challenge us this Christmas some 2,000 years later? His challenge is directly related to three concepts ...

Be Expectant (Luke 2:25-26)

Simeon was absorbed and locked on the prophesied coming of the Messiah:

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, ...

Hold it right there.

Every time Simeon went to the Temple he must have been thinking, "Will I encounter the Messiah today? Will I see Him walking into the Huldah gates on the southern wall? Will I bump into Him as we walk with other worshippers into Court of the Women? Yes, will I get a chance to see the new Messiah today?" What passion. What focus.

What an anomaly this man was and is.

We don't know anything about him. His job? Who knows. His home? Who knows? His tribe? Who knows. His family? Who knows. His educational level? Who knows. His financial status? Who knows. His age? Well, it appears from the account he was an old man for once he encountered the Messiah, Jesus, he remarked that now God could take him home. But, really, Simeon wears the cloak of obscurity.

What we do know about him is stated in these opening verses. He was "righteous and devout," meaning he had a reverential fear of God, he learned and applied God's teachings, and he took God's ancient promises concerning the Messiah seriously. Here, Luke calls the messianic promises "the consolation," from the noun *paraklesis* (παράκλησις), which means to comfort and is directly related to the name of the Holy Spirit in John 14 and 16 as the *Paraklatos/Paraclete* (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:27). Tied to Old Testament prophecy, *paraklesis* denotes the time of divine comfort which the Davidic Messiah establishes His long-awaited kingdom after He subdues the Devil and evil. Many texts speak of this coming kingdom with the Messiah at its geo-political head. Here's one from the pen of Isaiah.

¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. ² "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Historically, these words gave Israel in captivity encouragement that the ordeal was almost complete. They also held a future emphasis, too, as we encounter in verse 5 where God's glory would eventually be revealed among them. When He arrives in the kingdom age there will be true, lasting comfort for long-beleaguered, downcast Israel.

Isaiah develops the messianic comfort motif in chapter 52 as well.

⁷ How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, *And* says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” ⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up *their* voices, they shout joyfully together; for they will see with their own eyes when the LORD restores Zion. ⁹ Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The LORD has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:7–10).

Israel experienced great joy when they returned from Babylonian captivity in 536 B.C.; however, this would be nothing compared to the joy when the Messiah comes to save His people and bring His glorious kingdom to all of the earth. Truly, a time of world-wide comfort in every way: spiritually, politically, socially and so forth.

This is just a small textual taste of what Simeon feasted on his entire life. As he read and studied how God would one day fulfill His promise and bring the messianic King and Savior to earth from a plethora of Old Testament prophetic texts, he waited for them to be fulfilled in his lifetime. What faith. His example makes you stop and ask yourself: Am I just excited about the New Testament texts pointing to the final return of the Messiah, Jesus? Am I just as expectant? Does the thought of His glorious coming and majestic arrival capture my thought-life during the day? Does the Christmas season cause me to look beyond the manger to the King of Kings who shall appear at the proper time to consummate the Davidic Empire? Pause and reflect on some key inspired texts:

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up (2 Peter 3:10).

⁷ BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen (Revelation 1).

Verses like this should put wind in your limp sail and a smile on your face. That’s what it did for Simeon. Each day was one day closer to the potential of him getting to see the Messiah, and he lived each day expectantly and holy.

Let’s zero in on this last concept. Because he walked closely with God, because he made sure his theology impacted his practical life, because he drew near to God, God drew near to him and gave him deeper prophetic insight:

... 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.

See the relationship between being godly and hearing from God? We don’t know how it happened, but God let ol’ faithful, excited Simeon in on a jaw-dropping truth: He’d personally live to see the Messiah. Wow! What a privilege.

Simeon was a nobody by worldly standards, but God looked down from heaven and saw a man not just in love with Him, but a man truly pumped and excited about His Son's prophesied arrival. That expectancy met with a revelation of all revelations. Isn't this challenging and instructive to us in our day and age? Indeed. We, too, might be nobodies by the world's standards, however, from Simeon we learn the utter spiritual value of living each day, especially at Christmas, of looking for the next arrival of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus. What will you do this Christmas to be God's sentinel on the wall, scanning the horizon for signs of His coming?

In addition to be expectant, Simeon also reveals that when it comes to the revelation of the Messiah, we need to ...

Be Expressive (Luke 2:27-33)

I love this part of the story:

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:

Don't go any further. Let the words soak into the soil of your spiritual life.

I'm sure there is a lot left out of the historical, inspired text. Can't you just see Simeon walking around, perhaps with a cane to steady himself, looking at all the faces on the temple mount? Can't you just see Simeon touching and stopping various young men to see if anyone of them was, in fact, the Messiah? "Oh, sorry to bother you, but are you ... Ah, no, it's not you." "Hey, young man, could you turn around so I could see your face. Uh, no, you are not who I'm looking for." Can't you just see him checking babies in the arms of parents? "Could I pull those swaddling clothes away to catch a glimpse of your young son's face? Thanks." Can't you just see him when he finally rested his tired, old, beyond bifocals eyes on THE Christ? He probably danced ... cane free ... for the first time in a long time.

Really, what did Simeon do when he saw the long-awaited, prophesied Messiah? Simple. He praised God with sound theology:

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.

Wouldn't you have marveled if someone said this about your new firstborn son as you entered worship this day? As I said, Simeon's words echoed with excited, joyous praise.

First, he recognized the sovereignty of God who carefully and strategically orchestrated the coming of the Messiah. For thousands of years God had promised to send the One, and know He had arrived just as God had promised. What about you? What greater thing could you and your family do this Christmas than to take the lead from Simeon and praise God for specifically bringing Jesus to earth to save us?

- Thank you, Lord, for keeping the Messianic hope alive during the dark days of the Judges.
- Thank you, Lord, for keeping the Messianic hope burning brightly even when Israel chose to worship other gods during the period of the kings.
- Thank you, Lord, for keeping the Messianic hope flickering when there was no prophetic voice between the testaments.
- Thank you, Lord, for making sure Jesus was born in Bethlehem as prophesied (Micah 5:1-2).

Give God thanks for the Messiah this Christmas. It's what spiritual Simeon-types do.

Second, Simeon praised God for sending the only One capable of redeeming all of mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, from their sinful status. Jesus is THE Savior, you know. There are no other saviors for sinners. The Bible is clear on this life-changing truth:

¹² And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4).

To this definitive text, we can't help but mention the powerful, penetrating words of the Apostle Paul:

¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; ⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. ⁶ For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. ¹¹ And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation (Romans 5:1-11).

The narrow path to God's holy presence doesn't get any clearer than this. Access to a relationship to God is limited to the person and work of Jesus, the Christ ... period. Now that is something to praise God for. He has been more than clear, and that clarity calls for our praise. Is that praise on our lips this Christmas? Will you take the time, as Simeon did, to praise God's salvation plan which includes people from all nationalities who turn to Him in trusting faith? Why not start your praise time off with reading Old Testament texts which prophesied God's salvation being extended to Gentiles? Here's a few to prime the proverbial pump:

¹ Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³ And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear; ⁴ But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. ⁵ Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist. ⁶ And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. ⁷ Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ Then in that day the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples; and His resting place will be glorious (Isaiah 11:1-10).

So what about it? Are you, like Simeon, expectant? Are you, like Simeon, expressive once He has found you and you have found Him? There's one more thing we learn from this old, faithful saint ...

Be Enlightening (Luke 2:34-35)

If anything, Simeon spoke the theological truth concerning the impact of their son's future life:

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."

He didn't mince words, did he? He didn't soften the reality of the Messiah's future work, but told it like it is (or, would be). People, or Israelites, his countrymen, would either be for or against Him. Folks would either love Him or hate Him and their reaction to Him and his person, work, and words, would definitively reveal whether their hearts were bowed or stiffened against the living God. From what we know of His life, the majority of His people rejected Him outright (John 1:11; 6:66), while only a small minority dared to go against the godless, carnal current and trust Him as the only true Savior of sinners. And the hatred of the masses would be so great, so intense, it would, as Simeon notes, become a sharp sword in the heart of his now youthful mother. Interesting how the Greek word here for sword speaks of a large one, denoting, of course, the magnitude of the psychological pain Mary would incur as she watched Jesus walk up the lonely hill of Calvary to be crucified and die for our sins.¹

¹ Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature: **ρομφαία, ας, ἡ** 'a large and broad sword' used by non-Greek-speaking peoples, esp. the Thracians (Phylarch. [III B.C.]: 81 Fgm.

Simeon's words were tough but true. Jesus is the polarizing agent regarding eternity. You either embrace Him as the Savior, or you reject Him and wait for His eternal judgment. There is no middle ground. As Jesus would say later:

“He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Matthew 12:3).

Simeon spoke redemptive spiritual truth, even if it wasn't socially popular. He spoke up and out because he knew so much was at stake. He knew that one's response to this child, this Savior would result in either life or death, spiritually speaking; therefore, he was clear.

What better message could be on our lips this Christmas than the full, total gospel of Jesus?

Simeon might have been an obscure nobody, but in God's eyes he was a somebody, and that somebody still challenges us thousands of years later. Who will you challenge this Christmas season with the Savior as folks are all caught up with shopping, presents, office parties, decorating, movies, meals, and, well, you can fill in the blank. Yes, who will you challenge with the life-giving truth of the Master's true mission to earth?

57 Jac.; Plut., Aemil. 264 [18, 5]; Hesychius; Suda). In our lit. simply *sword* (so also LXX; pseudepigr.; Jos., Bell. 6, 289, Ant. 6, 254; 7, 299;—In Philo [like ApcMos] always of the angel's flaming sword after Gen 3:24) Lk 21:24 v.l.; Rv 2:16; 6:8; 19:15, 21. ῥ. δίστομος καὶ ὀξεῖα *a sharp and double-edged sword* Rv 2:12; cp. 1:16. φείδεσθαι τῆς ψυχῆς τινος ἀπὸ ῥ. *spare someone's life from the sword* (so that he may die on the cross) B 5:13 (Ps 21:21). In imagery for pain or anguish (s. Sib-Or 5, 260 v.l.) τὴν ψυχὴν διελεύσεται ῥομφαία Lk 2:35 (ῥ. διελεύσ. cp. SibOr 3, 316; Ezk 14:17.—Artem. 1, 41 p. 39, 19 τιτρώσκεσθαι κατὰ τὸ στήθος means 'receive sad news').—DELG. M-M. TW.¹