

Kids' letters to Santa:

I have been a very good girl this year. Even though I'm Jewish, I still believe in you! All I want for Hanukkah is love. I also want you to get rid of a girl Ariel hates. Love, Ariel

Could you make me a lot prettier than my friend Sabrina? That's my biggest and only wish! ~ Diana

Please text my dad. He has my whole list. Hugs and kisses.
Tennessee

I wanted to tell you that I am fine. I don't know, but if you could possibly make it so I could turn into a Dragon pleeeeee!! Or a pet dragon, either one will do. Though I would like it if you can make me turn into a dragon. P.S. Happy Valentine's Day.

I'm not going to ask for a lot. Here's my list: The Etch-A-Sketch animator, 2 packs of #2 pencils, Crayola fat markers and the big gift...my own color TV! Well, maybe you could drop the pencils; I don't want to be really selfish.

It's Claire again, but I'm writing for my 9-year-old brother named Mitch. He wants a binder, binder hole puncher (I want a hole puncher too), and a skateboard. But don't give the skateboard to him. Mitch is very kind-hearted but has a bad temper. He also writes messy and doesn't like to read.

Kids don't always get the Christmas spirit quite right. But there's one thing about Christmas kids do get right—the anticipating, the looking forward, the excited hoping. Once December hits, the thoughts of children are constantly drawn back to this one thing—Christmas is coming, and it's just around the corner!

There's a story in Luke 2 that draws our attention to this very aspect of Christmas—the wait, the build-up, the anticipation, until finally, the moment arrives. We're introduced to a man named Simeon, and his story confronts us with **three crucial questions** that determine whether we get the Christmas spirit right, or if we've missed something important like the kids who penned those letters to Santa.

Simeon first shows up in Luke 2:25. Ancient sources outside the Bible

offer interesting tidbits about Simeon—namely, that he was a priest, even a rabbi, and quite aged (112 years old). But unfortunately, there's nothing in the Bible to confirm any of that. Luke doesn't give us Simeon's age or his occupation. Instead, what matters to Luke is his spiritual condition (v 25):

- “righteous” – behaved properly toward people
- “devout” – God-fearing, careful about religious observance
- “Holy Spirit was upon him”
- “waiting for the consolation of Israel”

That's it—all we know about him. It's not a lot, but it's enough to show us that here is the consummate example of Christmas spirit. He is what we ought to be—loving toward people, loving toward God, spiritually sensitive, and waiting. We really should ask ourselves about all four of these qualities, but the passage really draws our attention to that last one I mentioned—Simeon was waiting.

Are you willing to wait?

What does that mean? Well, the Greek word for “waiting” doesn't come across perfectly well for us. It takes a couple different English words to express it fully, which I'll try to convey. The first is “rest”—waiting as rest. So the question is: **Are you at rest?** Is your soul patiently resting?

It's kind of a painful question, especially at this time of year. Today Christmas is almost synonymous with busyness, frenzy, chaos—the “Christmas rush.” We fill our schedules and max out our budgets and race from one thing to the next, blown here and there and everywhere, and finally collapse into Christmas Day with one final lurch and a gasp of relief. Restful waiting could hardly be further from our minds. But when Christmas began—when Jesus first came—He came to those who were waiting.

Notice the whole phrase: “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” It's a picturesque way of describing the coming of the Messiah:

v26 *And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*

The earliest *clear* promises of the Messiah went back 1,000 years before Simeon's time, and for all those years, Israel had waited. God had reiterated the promises here and there along the way through the

Jewish prophets, but for the last 400 years He had gone silent. No dreams. No angelic messengers. No word from God. Yet the faithful didn't get restless; they waited.

Waiting like this requires trust and patience, doesn't it? It requires a willingness to receive what is coming, whatever that might be, instead of agitating for something better. And it requires us to receive it in God's time instead of our own.

This is hard for us, and not exclusively at Christmas either. We don't wait well in general. If something doesn't suit our fancy, we complain. Sometimes we pray; but if the answer doesn't come in a few days, we fume and fuss and soon start working out a plan to get it done ourselves. Jesus often urged His followers to "watch and pray," but we're more inclined to fume and fret. As though God really weren't there. As though He really hadn't made us any promises. As though our ideas, our timing, and our priorities really were better than His.

Can I give you a practical suggestion here? This kind of restful waiting only arises as we meditate on the word of God. Luke doesn't explicitly say that in this passage, but it's right there just under the surface. Simeon was patiently waiting, but when he opened his mouth to speak, it sounded like he was leading a Bible study on Isaiah and Psalms. Look at Simeon's song and listen to how he echoes these OT passages:

Isaiah 52:10 *The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

Psalms 98:2 *The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*

Isaiah 49:6 *"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

Isaiah 60:3 *And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

Isaiah 45:25 *In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory.*

Waiting is sustained by the word. If we are filled with the word, we'll wait. Our heart will be at rest. So, friends, are you willing to wait?

Let's pick up Simeon's story again in verse 26. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him in some supernatural way that he would not die until he saw the Messiah; someday, his waiting would end. Verse 27 tells us that on this particular day, the Spirit tipped him off that the time had come. He headed into the temple, where he encountered Mary and Joseph, carrying their baby through the temple courts. He took the baby up in his arms and burst into song, and I want you to notice more closely what he says first:

v29 *Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;*

Literally the first word Simeon says is "now" — "NOW, Lord, you are letting me die in peace." This is the long-awaited moment, quite literally the culmination of all his hopes and dreams.

This moment has been Simeon's lifelong preoccupation, the focus of his daily thoughts, the one remaining item on his bucket list. The Spirit told him he wouldn't die until this happened (v 26), and when it finally does, Simeon feels that his life is fulfilled. Notice the phrase "in peace—letting your servant depart in peace." He has accomplished all he set out to do. He's satisfied, ready to go to the grave. This "waiting" is the final object of Simeon's life.

Waiting isn't simply rest; it also conveys eagerness, desire, the focus of all our attention. This is waiting as passion, and for Simeon, his passion was to see the Messiah. What is yours? This is the second question with which Simeon's story confronts us:

What are you waiting for?

What is your joy, your hope, your passion? If you got to do just one item on your personal bucket list, what would it be?

The passion of Simeon's life was to see the Messiah. His whole life climaxed in this moment. Was that a mistake? Did he waste his life, focusing so much attention on this one person, this one experience? What was so great about seeing the Messiah? Why would Simeon focus all his attention on that (other than the fact that this is a Bible story, and people in the Bible seem a little out of touch sometimes)?

Notice how Simeon goes on to interpret this moment and describe the little baby he's holding:

vv29-32 *Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."*

First (v30), he literally calls this baby "God's salvation." Salvation is rescue, and rescue for Simeon is a person! Next (v31), he says this moment has worldwide significance. This is the salvation God has been designed "in the presence of all peoples." Then (v 32), Simeon piles up several nouns to describe the Messiah:

- A light
- For revelation to Gentiles
- For glory to Israel

I'll reserve comment on the last two phrases, but I want to draw your attention to "light." It's another word for "salvation"—"my eyes have seen your salvation... a light for revelation and glory." In other words, salvation is light. What does he mean? He means that the rescue we need is the kind that light can provide. And what does light deliver us from? Darkness. Salvation = deliverance from darkness.

- Darkness of the curse (1:79 "those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death") – disease, war, poverty, hunger, loneliness, strife, guilt, etc.
- Darkness of Satan's power (22:53 "your hour and the power of darkness") – the tyranny of the devil
- Darkness of God's wrath (23:44-45 "darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour") – the wrath-bearing death

Our carols describe all three:

Wrath: "Hark! The herald angels sing / Glory to the newborn King / Peace on earth and mercy mild / God and sinners reconciled"

Satan: "God rest, ye merry gentlemen / Let nothing you dismay / Remember Christ our Savior / Was born on Christmas day / To save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray"

Curse: "No more let sin and sorrow grow / Nor thorns infest the ground / He comes to make His blessings flow / Far as the curse is found."

[take time to show how Jesus defeats all three – preach the gospel!]

This is why Simeon was so excited to see this child – because He was salvation. He was light and revelation and glory. He was deliverance from Satan. He was rescue from the wrath of God. He was the return to Shalom. And He was this for the whole world!

What are you waiting for? What is your life's passion? Are you, like Simeon, waiting for Jesus, centered on Jesus, looking for Jesus?

After his song of praise, Simeon finally notices Jesus' parents (vv33-34). They are amazed to think that their Son could do all this for the whole world. But then Simeon says something shocking, almost harsh:

vv34-35 *"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."*

What is he saying? Simeon is saying that there's something harsh about Christmas. There's a combativeness, something divisive about it. What's that? It's Jesus Himself. He is like a massive rock in the road, and you will either build your life on him and rise or stumble over him and fall. You cannot remain neutral about Jesus. His claims don't allow it.

Luke 5:20-21 *When he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." ²¹ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

Luke 9:23-26 *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*

Luke 23:43 *he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

Power to forgive sins? Authority to demand absolute loyalty? Prerogative to open paradise? These are striking claims, and if they came from anyone else, we would say he's a madman.

But then you look at His life... No one showed mercy like this man. No

one loved like Him, welcoming sinners, touching lepers, serving masses. Ponder these displays:

- Overcoming the embarrassment and resentment of the crowd toward the blind beggar's cries for mercy by pausing, bringing the man near, listening to his plea, and healing him with a single statement (Lk 18:35-43).
- Expressing free and lavish compassion for a woman who'd lost her husband and her son by returning the son to life even before she said a word (Lk 7:11-17).
- Illustrating the love of the God for His children with the story of a rebel son who gets exactly what he deserves from life but nothing of what he deserves from his dad (Lk 15:11-32).

Friends, let's be honest. We're in church. Most of you—but not all of you—are sympathetic to what I'm saying. When I ask "What are you waiting for?" your reflex answer is to say "Jesus." But this part of Simeon's song faces us with one final question:

Are you really?

Lots of people don't "rise or fall" because of Jesus. Why not? Because they don't know who the real Jesus is. They've connected with a myth – someone who makes them feel comfortable. Their Jesus doesn't make demands. He doesn't inspire much excitement, but He doesn't inspire hate either. And He certainly would never bring a sword. Friends—Christian or not—let me say this as clearly and gently as I can: That's not the real Jesus!!

The real Jesus drives a sword through your soul if you follow Him. It hurts. He requires repentance, surrender, self-denial. He makes you uncomfortable one way or the other, either by His love or His lordship. He will either demand what you don't want to give or call you to love in costly ways when you would rather play it safe.

ILLUS: *The Prestige* (2006) by Christopher Nolan – Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale), rival magicians competing for popular preeminence in London in the latter 1800s. It's a story of creativity and skill, drama and intrigue, mystery and surprise. But above all, it's an incredible story of obsession and the lengths to which men

will go under its power. They both develop a trick called "The Transported Man," but to pull it off, both must sacrifice more and more that is dear to them. Ultimately, it costs both men their lives... sort of. This is what a real, life-dominating passion looks like, even for a Christian.

If you follow Jesus, it will cost you everything. But, as Jesus said, if you give up your life for Him, you will truly find it.

Are you willing to wait?

What are you waiting for?

Are you really?

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