

LUKE 2:25-32
THE FIRST PERSON TO DIE IN THE FAITH

“There was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 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. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”¹

God attends the death of His saint; the child of God is not deserted at death. Holy angels await the Master’s call to transport His child into His eternal presence. This truth is emphasised throughout the Word. On numerous occasions, I have ministered to weary saints as they neared the time of their exodus. Frequently I have heard believers speak of their longing to be finished with their trials; I have witnessed their peace at the prospect of their soon-to-be transition.

The Psalmist spoke a comforting truth in these words:

“Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.”

[PSALM 116:15]

Multiplied thousands of saints have died in the Faith; thousands more may yet die before Christ the Lord returns. These will not die in defeat, but in victory. The message today is a study of the first person to die in the Faith of Christ the Lord. It focuses on a man who appears as a minor character in the drama of redemption. Yet, Simeon is the first person to die in the Faith. He appears but once in the Word of God, and that at the very beginning of Jesus’ life. I recommend that a study of God’s revealed Word will encourage us and equip us to be more effective in our service to Christ.

THE CHARACTER OF THE FIRST PERSON TO DIE IN THE FAITH —I want to know what makes an individual “tick.” What motivates people to act as they do? This is a serious question to my mind. I want to know of the character of those I read about in the Word of God. We know something of the character of Simeon; the text describes him as “righteous and devout” and as “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” Anyone whom God identifies as righteous and devout merits our careful attention.

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In preparing for the study I came across a snippet of information concerning a man named Simeon who lived in Jerusalem at about this time. Here, in brief, is the account of that man.

[Simeon] dwelt now in Jerusalem, and was eminent for his piety and communion with God. Some learned men, who have been conversant with the Jewish writers, find that there was at this time one Simeon, a man of great note in Jerusalem, the son of Hillel, and the first to whom they gave the title of *Rabban*, the highest title that they gave to their doctors, and which was never given but to seven of them. He succeeded his father Hillel, as president of the college which his father founded, and of the great Sanhedrin. The Jews say that he was endued with a *prophetical* spirit, and that he was turned out of his place because he witnessed against the common opinion of the Jews concerning the temporal kingdom of the Messiah; and they likewise observe that there is no mention of him in their Mishna, or book of traditions, which intimates that he was no patron of those fooleries.²

Perhaps these words do not describe the same man; but then again, perhaps they do. There are objections and there are strong points of similarity. What is certain is that Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, likely received his information during interviews with Mary. Regardless of the identity of this Simeon, we know of his character, and this knowledge can serve to encourage each of us in our own desire to honour God.

Simeon was “righteous and devout.” The words employed are not at all rare, but the combination is suggestive of a character trait that should mark each individual looking for the revelation of the Son of God and seeking to honour God. The two terms, bound in such close connection to one another, speak of obedience to God and the outward expression of that obedience. In short, Simeon was “righteous” towards men and “devout” towards God. Righteousness and devotion seem always to go together. We cannot serve God without the impact of our service being witnessed by those about us.

The Greek term which is applied to Simeon and which is translated “righteous,” when applied to disciples of the Living God usually speaks of fidelity to the Law. Inherent within the word is a stress on one’s relationship with God. A righteous individual is one who walks with God and who seeks to please God in every area of life where God has revealed what is pleasing to Him. The term “righteous” speaks of a disciple who truly keeps the Law or who does God’s will. Since God has chosen to describe Simeon as “righteous,” we may assume that he was careful to maintain the Law of God, an expression of his desire to maintain a close relationship with the Lord. We would not be remiss to conclude that Simeon kept the Law without partiality or prejudice.

Because of our propensity for depending upon our own merits and for exaggerating our own supposed goodness, it is necessary for me to point out the fact that no one is saved by observing the Law. Outward righteousness is important, but without inward righteousness, observance of the Law becomes meaningless. The great sin of the Pharisees was that they depended upon their observance of the Law instead of looking to God for their justification.

This emphasis is found in the letter to Roman Christians. “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” [**ROMANS 4:1-3**].

² Matthew Henry’s Commentary, Article on Luke 2:25-40, Logos Library System, 7th Ed., 1997

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Simeon was “righteous” in observing the Law of God. People would have known him to be conscientious and careful to obey all that God had commanded. They would know that his was not merely mindless adherence to the revealed will of God, for he was also “devout.” The word translated “devout” is interesting in part because of its association with another word. These two words, *eulabés* and *eusābés*, together describe an individual who is godly or pious [e.g. ACTS 10:2; 2 PETER 2:9].

The word *eulabés*, translated “devout” in our text, is a compound word that literally means “to take hold of well.” The word spoke of exercising care or caution to fulfil a duty. Thus, it came to be applied to the careful observance of religious duties. By the time Doctor Luke wrote his account of the Good News about the Jesus, Son of God, the word was understood to speak of the careful realisation of the presence and claims of God. It would suggest one who revered God, and who was thus devout or pious.

As an aside, it is interesting to note the distinction in the concept of “devout” that is observed between Old and New Testament passages. The use of this word in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures would speak of “fear of God” as the motivating force for devotion to Him. The use of the word in the New Testament spoke of “love for God” as the motivating force. Just as there was love in the fear of God for Old Testament saints, there must be fear in the love of saints now. What is important to realise is that love must be the dominant motivation for our service if we will please God.

We know that Simeon was righteous in his relationship to men and devout before God. Underlying this life of righteousness and devotion was a longing for God to fulfil His promise toward Israel, for Simeon was “waiting for the consolation of Israel.” He was waiting for the coming of Messiah. In Messiah alone would the nation find consolation. The Christ would be not only the author of His people’s comfort, but He was to be the matter and the ground of comfort. Why should Simeon wait at this time?

In earlier studies, I have alluded to the fact that the scholars of the Law would have known enough concerning Messiah’s coming to be prepared for Him. Specifically, they should have known the lineage of Messiah, the place of His birth and the timing of His revelation. Throughout the unfolding Scriptures, the Lord God had spoken of the coming of His Messiah and identified the lineage of this coming ruler of Israel.

The promised Messiah was to be “born of the seed of a woman” [GENESIS 3:15]. He would be Abraham’s child [GENESIS 13:15]. The lineage of the Messiah would be traced through Isaac [GENESIS 17:19], through Jacob [GENESIS 25:23], and through Judah [GENESIS 49:10; NUMBERS 24:17-19]. The Messiah would be “of the line of David,” sitting on David’s throne [2 SAMUEL 23:5; PSALM 89:19-29]. In fact, Messiah would be known as David’s Branch [see ISAIAH 4:2; 11:1-5], a reference to His royal lineage. Have you ever investigated the lineage provided by Matthew and Luke? They are not identical, differing dramatically at a critical juncture. Have you ever questioned why there are two lineages differing in critical detail?

Matthew provides the paternal genealogy of Jesus, the genealogy through Joseph, his legal father. You will notice that this genealogy carefully follows the kings of Judah from David through Jeconiah, and then details the descendants of Jeconiah, also known as Coniah or Jehoiachin. God, through Jeremiah, pronounces a curse on Jehoiachin [JEREMIAH 22:24-30]. That curse said no descendent of Jehoiachin would ever again sit upon David’s throne, which superficially appears to rule out Messiah ever occupying the throne of His father David.

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In contrast to Matthew's account, Luke's genealogy differs significantly. It deviates from Matthew's genealogy beginning with David and onward toward Jesus. Careful reading reveals that this genealogy traces David's line through his son Nathan instead of through Solomon. Matthew's genealogy provides the royal lineage. Luke's genealogy provides the lineage that circumvents the curse placed on Jehoiachin.

Note the manner in which Luke begins his genealogy. "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, *being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph*" [LUKE 3:23]. This is the lineage of Jesus through Mary and not through Joseph. Matthew gives the royal lineage of Jesus through Joseph and Luke gives the divine lineage that negates the curse. Thus, Jesus could lay valid claim to the throne of David both due to fulfilling the Davidic covenant and through avoiding the curse on Coniah. These facts were a matter of record that would have been known to anyone faintly familiar with the Temple records and the Hebrew Scriptures, which would include every scholar of the Law and would likely include every Pharisee.

Moreover, scholars would have known the place of Messiah's birth, for Micah had written of that birth.

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
 who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
 from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to be ruler in Israel,
 whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days."

[MICAH 5:2]

The scholars quoted this verse to Herod when he asked where the King of the Jews was to be born. Queried by the scheming king, the scholars did not need to confer with one another. Immediately, they quoted Micah's prophecy [see MATTHEW 2:6].

The scholars should have known the time of Messiah's advent, for Daniel had written of that coming. DANIEL 9:20-27 is a detailed chronology of Messiah's coming. Without going into detail, "the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem" [VERSE 25] refers to the fourth of four decrees that were made by Persian rulers in reference to the Jews. This decree was issued by Artaxerxes Longimanus on March 5th, 444 B.C. [cf. NEHEMIAH 2:1-8]. After *seven weeks* and *sixty-two weeks*, or 483 years, Messiah would be cut off. This period concluded on the day of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem just before Christ was "cut off." In other words, Jewish scholars knew that Messiah's presence was at hand.

THE MINISTRY OF THE FIRST PERSON TO DIE IN THE FAITH — We know that Simeon's ministry, which he received from God and which he performed, was a ministry of waiting—he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." Enrobed in the Holy Spirit, Simeon was intimately acquainted with the promises of God; and the knowledge that the revelation of the Messiah was at hand motivated him toward righteousness and toward devotion to God, and "the Holy Spirit was upon him." In the Old Testament, men were not said to be filled with the Spirit, but the Spirit was said to "come upon men." The concept to the Hebrew mind was similar to that of being cloaked with the Spirit of God. Luke tells us that Simeon was wrapped in, even cloaked with the Spirit of God.

Some imagine God's Spirit to be a power capable of being manipulated. Others demonstrate that they consider the Spirit's presence a means of personal gain. I remind you that the Spirit of God dwells within each believer; and nowhere should the Spirit be more evident than among the people of God when they are gathered for worship of the Lord. Surrendered to Christ and living to glorify Him, the Spirit directs us in worship.

Preparing His disciples for His nearing exodus, Jesus taught them about the Spirit. Jesus said, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you" [JOHN 16:7-15].

Simeon's life reveals that God's Spirit guides His people into truth. He does this by speaking what He hears, taking from the Son of God and making it known to Christ's disciples; the Spirit points to Christ the Lord. Underscore in your mind this vital truth: ***the Spirit of God does not draw attention to Himself, but rather He exalts Christ the Lord.*** We recognise the spiritual individual when he or she seeks Christ and because that one seeks to point others to Christ. Spiritual people live in anticipation of Messiah.

The ministry of waiting must not be thought of as a license for idleness. Paul spoke of the ministry of waiting assigned to each believer. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, ***we wait for it with patience***" [ROMANS 8:22-25].

Waiting is not equated with idleness. "You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, ***as you wait*** for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" [1 CORINTHIANS 1:7-9].

Paul gives an exceptionally strong statement concerning the ministry of waiting. "We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and ***to wait for his Son from heaven***, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" [1 THESSALONIANS 1:4-10].

The Thessalonians were commended for anticipating Jesus' return; and they were commended for their labours in the Faith. This is the ministry of waiting. If we believe Jesus' promise that He shall come again, we will be busily living as though we believed that promise. We will warn people of "the wrath to come" [LUKE 3:7]; others, we will "snatch[] out of the fire" in order that we might save them [JUDE 23]; and we will "be diligent to be found by Him without spot or blemish, and at peace" [2 PETER 3:14].

To wait for "the consolation of Israel"—the Messiah—meant that Simeon lived a life of anticipation, just as Jesus described in LUKE 12:35-38. "Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants" [see also MARK 13:32-37].

To wait for the consolation of Israel anticipates that an individual will have a hope in God "that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust" [ACTS 24:15]. Indeed, we who know Christ the Lord now wait "for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people that for His own possession who are zealous for good works" [TITUS 2:13, 14].

It is reasonable to appropriate the same ministry of waiting to each of us today. Simeon was not alone in "waiting for the consolation of Israel." Anna, an aged prophetess, also saw the child that day. She lifted her voice to bless the Lord and spoke about the child "to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" [LUKE 2:38]. Ever since the fall of our first parents, there has always been a remnant that looks to God to fulfil His promise. We, also, if we pray with conviction the words of the model prayer that the Master gave us, must live a life of marked with anticipation.

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven."

[MATTHEW 6:9, 10]

I encourage each of you this day to develop the ministry of waiting. I am equally insistent in encouraging each of us to do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. What better time than this Christmas season when we remember the First Advent of our Lord Jesus for us encourage each other to heed the admonition to be filled with the Spirit of God! Listen again to the admonition of the Apostle to the saints of Christ the Lord.

"At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” [EPHESIANS 5:8-20].

As Christians, when we are filled with the Spirit, we will not be led into esoteric, unprofitable realms; instead, we will be led into an eminently practical life. Filled with the Spirit, we will endeavour to find out what pleases the Lord, and we will be empowered to do that which we discover. Filled with the Spirit, we will become alive to conditions about us, as we would never previously have thought possible. Filled with the Spirit, we will promote harmony within the church and unity among the people of God as never before. Filled with the Spirit, we will be led on a journey culminating in gloriously powerful worship. Filled with the Spirit, we will be awake to God’s work, and we will be enabled to wait in confidence, knowing that He is in control. This is what is meant when we speak of being filled with the Spirit.

THE JOY OF THE FIRST PERSON TO DIE IN THE FAITH — We do not know when Simeon died. Whether he was an old man at the time of Mary’s purification in the Temple with but a few years to live or whether he was young and anticipating many more years of life, we do not know. If older, then he had no doubt spoken for long years of his expectation. If younger, we would anticipate that he wisely invested the coming years speaking of Messiah’s presence to prepare a people for the presence of the Lord his God.

Whatever his age and whatever may or may not have transpired after he had witnessed the fulfilment of the Lord’s promised advent, this man was filled with joy. Taking the babe in his arms, he praised God. We know the content of his praise.

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

[LUKE 2:29-32]

No wonder the child’s “father and mother marvelled at what was said about Him.” This child had induced a wonderfully joyous outburst at the thought of His presence among men. Nor was this outburst from just any individual passing through the Temple courts. It was delivered by a man recognised as righteous and devout, one who was clothed with the Spirit of God. When a man such as Simeon speaks, we should listen! When one speaks who lives for the unveiling of God’s Messiah, should we not listen?

Simeon then blessed Joseph and Mary. The blessing delivered was no doubt because of their obedience to the will of the Lord. In their obedience, they were of kindred hearts with those who seek the glory of the Lord God. The blessing of God, however, is not always without pain to the flesh. Assuredly, Joseph knew pain in obedience to God. Bearing the stigma of marrying a woman who was pregnant before the wedding, Joseph no doubt felt the sting of small-town censure for the rest of his life.

I grew up without a mother in the home. Two families in our little town had been deserted by the mother. Two families, with two little boys in each family, experienced the prejudice of small-towns during my youth. I know what it is to hear mothers forbid their children to play with me because I didn't have a mother. I know what it is to hear parents forbid their daughters to go with me for a soda because I was motherless. I have personally felt the cruel lash of acid tongues fuelled by withered minds. In a small measure I identify with the pain Joseph experienced. As Simeon blessed the youthful couple, no doubt Joseph wondered about the blessing.

The words Simeon spoke to Mary, though they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, must surely have cast a shadow over her soul as she listened. "This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" [LUKE 2:34, 35]. The child would be the cause of the rising of many—common fishermen would be exalted before the Lord, and tax collectors and prostitutes would know the forgiveness of sin. The child would also be the cause of the falling for many in Israel—the nobility of Israel would stumble at His presence; the religious leadership of the nation would be exposed for their blindness. This rising and falling would not be without cost to Mary herself, for a sword would pierce her own soul.

One of the most tender and most wrenching scenes played out at the cross is presented in the poignant words of the Apostle John. "Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" [JOHN 19:25-27]. I speak with great conviction when I tell you that nothing will tear the heart of a parent more than execution of an unjust sentence on that parent's child.

Before the "salvation" of which Simeon spoke should be revealed, this child must die. Before the "light for revelation to the Gentiles" and for "glory to ... Israel" would be revealed, this child must die. His would be a premature death, a most unnatural death. The rising and the falling of many in Israel would be preceded by death on a cruel cross. His own people would not receive Him. The Christmas message is a message of sacrifice that brings life and light. The death of Christ is the forgotten purpose of His Advent. This sacrifice is the message neglected and forgotten in this day late in the Age of Grace.

It is not a dark thing to speak of the sacrifice of Jesus the Son of God at this time. It is not morbid and gloomy to make mention of His sacrifice for sin at Christmastide. We know that it is by His death that our sin is put away. By His sacrifice, God has provided a means by which we may approach Him without condemnation and without guilt. Had the Son of God been put to death, and His death was the end of the story, it would be a dark matter to speak of that death regardless of the timing of the discussion. However, His death was not the end of the story.

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“After the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.’ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me’” [MATTHEW 28:1-10].

The birth of Jesus heralds the Good News that I may receive the divine gift of life. My sin need no longer condemn me, for He was born to give His life as a sacrifice for my sin. I need no longer fear God; I can now stand before Him, holy and righteous in Christ the Lord. By faith in the Risen Son of God, I now live. I need not understand the mechanics of the New Birth to experience that glorious transformation. I need but believe this glorious Good News, that God became a man that He might die, the just for the unjust. Now by faith in Him, my sin can be put away and I can be forever cleansed of all unrighteousness.

How true is that word which Paul has penned. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:1-10].

And that is our invitation to you this Christmas Day—to believe the message of life in Christ the Lord. To be born into the Kingdom of God, to be forgiven every sin, to be made new before the Living God, come to this Christ the Son of God, trusting His grace. Believe in Him and be saved. Let this be a truly joyous Christmas as you receive the forgiveness of sin and as you are made new in life before God. This is the promise of God for all who will receive this Jesus as Master of life. Amen.