

## **Mary's Sorrow**

Luke 2:21-35

A few minutes ago we read the birth narrative from Luke 2. Luke next records what happened when Jesus was 40 days old: Mary and Joseph made the trip to Jerusalem to “present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:21-22). Up to that time, everything revealed about Jesus involved triumph and victory; but in the temple Mary learned that Jesus’ life (and therefore her life) would also be marked by sorrow.

Mary’s sorrow can give us a valuable perspective on our own sorrow. Just as the first Advent involved an element of sorrow, most of us here today are experiencing some type of sorrow – some type of heartache. A year ago you probably couldn’t have predicted the types of sorrow you’d experience in 2016. Your sorrow might be the result of a strained/broken relationship, the result of some sin (your own or someone else’s), or simply the result of circumstances beyond your control. Sometimes we experience sorrow because this life just isn’t working out the way we thought it would. With our sorrow in mind, let’s see what we might learn from Mary’s sorrow.

### ***Simeon’s Prophecy of Mary’s Sorrow (Luke 2:21-35)***

In verses 21-24 Luke describes how Mary and Joseph fulfilled all of the requirements of the Law. As their first-born son, they presented Jesus to the Lord at the temple. The Law also required a sacrifice for purification after the birth of a child. Mary and Joseph brought a sacrifice of two birds - the offering required of those who couldn’t afford to bring lambs. Jesus was born into a poor family.

In verse 25 we meet the man who understood - perhaps more than anyone else in the gospels - what Jesus’ life would be like. We read in verse 25:

25 And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 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.

Apparently Simeon had only one item on his “bucket list”: he wanted to see the Messiah, the ‘consolation/encouragement of Israel.’ Israel was downtrodden because of the occupation of the Romans, the legalism of the Pharisees, the absence of the prophets. In the midst of such circumstances, people like Simeon were looking for the relief that would come only through the Messiah. And the Holy Spirit Himself had revealed to Simeon that the longing of his heart would be fulfilled.

In verse 27 we read how the Holy Spirit orchestrated this encounter between Simeon and the Messiah:

27 And he [Simeon] came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,  
29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace

According to Your word;  
30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation,  
31 Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES,  
And the glory of Your people Israel."

As Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, he knew that now life was complete. Simeon, an old man, gets closure to his life by simply holding an infant. When he looked at the baby, he saw salvation. Jesus wasn't only bringing a **message** of salvation --- He Himself **was** salvation. It is impossible to separate forgiveness of sin, acceptance by God, and eternal life from Jesus Himself. This baby was God's Salvation!

Simeon goes on to describe the mission of Jesus in terms of what He would reveal to both Jews and Gentiles: He would be *A light of revelation to the gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel*. Anyone who cared to notice would see the light and glory of God Himself. After this description of Jesus, we read in verse 33:

33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him.

Simeon had provided another wonderful confirmation for Joseph and Mary that they were within the will of God. They had heard from angels and shepherds and relatives how blessed this child would be. Here they heard from an elderly priest that their Child was the Anointed One from God. And they were amazed.

What Simeon says next changes everything.

34 And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed-- 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul-- to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

For the first time Mary heard that her Son's mission of bringing salvation to the world would involve confrontation, conflict, and suffering. Simeon said that this Child *is appointed [by God] for the fall and rise of many in Israel*. The NT consistently depicts Jesus as a 'stumbling block' which some would stumble over. Those who didn't accept Jesus' message would **fall**.

But many others would **rise**. Interestingly enough, this word 'rise' is most commonly translated 'resurrection'; it is associated with **spiritual life and spiritual health**. Those who heard His message and believed Him would experience vitality and life. Instead of stumbling and falling, they would remain upright and to enter the kingdom of God.

Simeon also tells Mary that Jesus would be "a sign to be opposed." As you read through the gospels, you see that when people understood who Jesus really claimed to be, their opposition to Him grew. The opposition to Jesus as 'the sign of God' eventually led to His crucifixion.

We'll come back to his comment to Mary, but notice that Simeon mentions one more dynamic of Jesus' life: *thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*. When people encountered Jesus, the inner workings of their hearts were exposed. Nobody could hide when they were in the presence of Jesus. The thoughts of their hearts were revealed. Jesus was a fork in the road in the life of everyone He met. When people encountered Jesus, they were either drawn closer to God or confirmed in their unbelief.

Of course the same thing is true today. When you encounter Jesus and hear that He died for your sin, there's no place to hide: the thoughts of your heart will be revealed. When I first encountered Jesus (age 20), I saw my own sinfulness very clearly for the first time. Instead of feeling condemnation, I felt relief that Someone understood me and what I needed. I needed forgiveness of sin (one of the greatest burdens you can bear is not being forgiven) and I needed life. That's what God gave me in Jesus. That same offer is available to every single person here tonight. Nobody is too sinful or too far gone. When the condition of your heart is revealed, turn to Jesus in faith and you will experience the spiritual health and vitality that Jesus provided by His death and resurrection.

Everything Simeon has just said suggests that Jesus' ministry would be full of conflict and opposition. Simeon therefore tells Mary that a ***sword will pierce even your own soul***. She would pay a personal price for the opposition Jesus would encounter in His life. Surely Mary contemplated this statement about a sword piercing her own soul. Her exuberance over her Child sitting on the throne of David forever was tempered by the reality that His mission would be very costly – not only to Jesus but to her as well. She was given an exalted place in the history of salvation, but it would involve sorrow and suffering.

I think we have to conclude that “a sword piercing her own soul” was ***essential*** to her calling as the mother of Jesus. Mary's sorrow wasn't a mistake and it wasn't wasted. Mary's sorrow was part of her calling. And Mary embraced that part of her calling.

***What might Mary's sorrow teach us?*** Three things come to mind: First, ***we can embrace our sorrow as part of God's calling in our lives***. Mary's experience suggests that God wants our hearts broken for the right things. Mary could have backed away from her calling once it became obvious that Jesus would endure what no mother wanted her son to endure. But she didn't. Mary watched as Jesus was arrested, tortured, and then crucified. Mary didn't shrink back from her sorrow. Mary watched Jesus gasp for breath, speak His last words, and die. Mary stood at the foot of the cross ***both*** as a mother and as a disciple of Jesus. And a sword pierced her own soul.

If you and I are going to fulfill our calling in this world, we will have to make peace with the idea that it is the will of God for us to experience sorrow, even deep sorrow at times. You can avoid a lot of sorrow by keeping your distance from people; you can isolate yourself from the suffering around you. You will avoid sorrow, but you will also avoid the satisfaction of being used by God in people's lives. You can't watch the news about Aleppo or about terrorist attacks around the world or about ways that people are suffering

in this country without experiencing sorrow. When we are at our spiritual best, our sorrow prompts us to show compassion to people in need and to cry out to God to rescue people out of their desperate circumstances.

Second, ***our sorrow can lead to humility.*** Just as Mary was informed that she would bear a Child who would be called the Son of the Most High God, she was also informed that “a sword will pierce your own soul.” God didn’t first consult her and ask, “Is this okay?” He gave her the assignment of being the mother of the Messiah who would suffer and die. And God doesn’t consult with us before piercing our souls with a sword. We are in control of very few things in our lives; we have the illusion of control sometimes, but “life happens” and we realize that we really aren’t in control of our health, our finances, our children, this church, etc.

When sorrow enters our life, it should therefore humble us to the core. Our sorrow should prompt us to cry out on a heart-level, “God, You are sovereign and I’m not.” That’s a stance of humility. Sorrow and suffering can either make a person bitter or humble. I can think of numerous people who’ve experienced deep sorrow this past year who have drawn nearer to God in humility. It’s a beautiful and powerful thing to see.

This Advent season, let’s allow our sorrow to soften our hearts and produce the fruit of humility in our lives.

***Our sorrow can show us where God is at work.*** If we follow Mary’s sorrow, it points like a laser to what God was doing in this world. And in this world – this sin-saturated world – our sorrow clues us in to what God is doing in our midst. Frederick Buechner wrote this:

Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where . . . you should go next.

Beuchner, *Beyond Words*

When was the last time you had unexpected tears? When was the last time your heart was broken – either over something in your own life or in the life of others?

Your sorrow is a clue to where God is at work in your life and in the lives of others. If we allow it to, our sorrow will reveal how we should pray and where we should show compassion. Like Mary, our sorrow won’t be wasted; our sorrow is not a mistake. Our sorrow will provide one more way that we declare the glory of God.