With age comes experience that exposes us to the joys and sorrows of life. Simeon and the widow Anna lived long enough to see both. Yet they never experienced more hope, or sadness, than when Israel’s long-awaited Messiah was brought to the temple as an infant to be dedicated.

In the following excerpt from *Windows On Christmas*, Bill Crowder, RBC Director of Church Ministries, shows how the stories of Simeon and Anna give us a basis for a personal hope that can survive anything this world throws at us.

Mart De Haan
ANTICIPATION

It seems that half of the fun of Christmas is looking forward to it. As a child, I counted down the days to Christmas Eve, then struggled to sleep on that anxious night. But for me it wasn’t “visions of sugarplums” that danced in my head. It was a mind filled with wondering and dreaming of what awaited on Christmas morning. The actual opening of presents was almost anticlimactic. The real fun was the anticipation.

As an adult, it’s somewhat different. I still look forward to Christmas morning—but the anticipation has been reversed. I look forward to seeing the expressions of excitement and happiness as my wife Marlene, my kids, and the grandkids open the presents I give them. Where once the joy of anticipation was in receiving, it’s now in giving. But through it all, the days and weeks of anticipation give that morning a special quality.

Anticipation is like that. It intensifies our feelings about events—whether it be Christmas morning, the birth of a child, the start of a new job, the celebration of wedding vows, or a move to a new city.

Anticipation intensifies our feelings about events—whether it be Christmas morning, the birth of a child, the start of a new job, the celebration of wedding vows, or a move to a new city.

©2010 RBC Ministries
child, the start of a new job, the celebration of wedding vows, or a move to a new city. Much of the excitement and joy is in the anticipation of it. I love that.

LOOKING FOR THE KING
Anticipation of the joy of Christmas morning is not new. The first Christmas, when the greatest Gift of all was given, was marked by an anticipation that had stretched across the centuries.

The people of Israel had anticipated the coming of a Redeemer/Rescuer for centuries. In fact, ever since the fall of our first parents in Eden’s garden, there was a longing for the promised “seed” of the woman who would come and crush our spiritual enemy (Gen. 3:15).

As time marched on, Old Testament singers and sages, prophets and priests, kings and generals spoke of the Messiah who would come and deliver God’s people. And still they waited.

Then an angelic messenger brought news to an engaged couple in the little village of Nazareth that the time of waiting was over. The anticipation of the coming Christ was about to find realization in the womb of a virgin. And that announcement launched Mary and Joseph into 9 months of their own personal anticipation of the coming of the Son of God.

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, two elderly people also anticipated the birth of the King. One was a man, the other a woman. One had received a promise that he would
personally see the Christ in his own lifetime. The other was a widow who had spent many years in the humble service of God, ready to respond to whatever opportunity God brought her way. One responded to the arrival of Messiah with prophecy and celebration, and the other with witness and declaration.

For Simeon and Anna, however, their anticipation of the coming Messiah—as intense and as strong as it had been—could never match that amazing moment when they saw the Christ. This is their story.

THE CONTENTMENT OF SIMEON

Years ago, I heard Dallas Seminary professor Howard Hendricks say that Christmas in America is not so much about giving as it is about swapping. If we give someone a fabulous gift, and the gift we receive from them is, well, less than fabulous, that’s okay. We’ll make sure that things get evened out the next year when it comes time to select their gift. Who hasn’t sometimes felt just a little slighted at the inadequacy of a gift received? (Come on, be honest now.) In fact, our culture feeds that disappointment by pointing our attention to gifts that are impossible for the average person to afford. Still, we wake up on Christmas morning certain that someone, whose love for us will be measured by the quality of his or her gift to us, is going to hit it out of the park this year. How can anything but the weeds
of discontent grow in that kind of emotional playing field?

For me, this drags my memory back to when I was 12 years old, the year I asked for a guitar for Christmas. My request seemed perfectly reasonable. After all, how could I become the next Paul McCartney or George Harrison if I didn’t start playing? I lay awake all Christmas Eve imagining the feel of my fingers on the strings and the effortless chords that would flow from that instrument (never mind the fact that I didn’t know how to play).

Finally, Christmas morning arrived. I waited anxiously until Dad gave the signal for us kids to descend on the Christmas tree like a plague of locusts. Then I dashed down the stairs to the living room and looked all over for my guitar—but it wasn’t there! And to make matters worse, I found in its place the worst Christmas gift any 12-year-old boy/aspiring Beatle ever received—a dictionary!

Now, from the perspective of my alleged adulthood, it’s clear that I was never going to be the 1960’s equivalent of “American Idol.” And I acknowledge that I have spent my adult life dealing with words. Therefore, the dictionary was a gift that had much

A day intended to be a joyful day of celebration had been darkened by the cloud of disappointment.
more enduring value and worth. But you could never have convinced a heartbroken 12-year-old of that fact. A day intended to be a joyful day of celebration had been darkened by the cloud of disappointment. Under that cloud, speeches regarding the need to be grateful, happy, or content only exacerbated my disappointment. That’s what comes from expectations that are either unrealistic or deceived. They will never produce contentment.

So this section is a rather challenging one for me to write because it reminds me of how selfish inappropriate expectations can be, and how necessary it is—especially during the season devoted to God’s gift to us—to recalibrate my own expectations. The challenge to cultivate a heart of contentment is a tough thing to grapple with, and millions of bad examples of wrong expectations and deep disappointment could be cited as warnings. Perhaps a better plan would be to see a single example of right expectations and the profound contentment they can generate.

**HIS LIFE OF DEVOTION**

As I think of a life of devotion, the names and faces of people who have lived long lives of spiritual
service and faithfulness fill my memory—people whose examples have influenced my own heart and thinking about ministry. It seems that at every critical step along the way in my own spiritual journey, I have been privileged to encounter an older saint who was walking the walk and doing the work with joy and satisfaction.

While I may feel underqualified to write about the qualities of a life of devotion, I am pretty sure that I know a life of devotion when I see it. It has a lot to do with “staying by the stuff” and “buckling in for the long haul” and “running all the way to the finish line”—and all those other clichés that are made trivial because they tend to be timed with a stopwatch when what they really require is a calendar. A life of devotion demands more. It demands everything.

This perspective on the Christmas story involves just such a man. Simeon, now in his advancing years, had been a fixture at the temple in Jerusalem for longer than anyone could remember. But he kept showing up, honoring his God, waiting for the Promise. His devotion was captured by Luke with only a few words, but each one is packed with insight:

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 (Lk. 2:25).

Simeon had a track record instead of a reputation. Notice how he is described:

• “Righteous”: In the
broad sense, *righteous* refers to a person who is upright, virtuous, keeping the commands of God. It speaks of someone who is committed to living life on God’s terms instead of his or her own. In a narrower sense, *Strong’s Concordance* describes a righteous person as one who deals appropriately and fairly with others. In either case, it’s certainly a noble title worthy of our aspirations.

- **“Devout”**: This word speaks of a person who reveres God and allows that reverence to impact his life and his choices. Whereas *righteous* has to do with obeying God, one who is *devout* is consumed with honoring God. A significant commitment indeed.

- **“Looking for the consolation of Israel”**: “The consolation of Israel” is a reference to the Messiah. Simeon was living his life based on this anticipation—“looking for” the Messiah. While many people, especially senior citizens, appear to be consumed with the past, Simeon was fixated on the future.

- **“The Holy Spirit was upon him”**: This is fascinating because until the Holy Spirit came to indwell believers at Pentecost (see Acts 2), the Spirit’s role was largely in the background. The Spirit’s filling of an individual in this way is a New Testament phenomenon that was being experienced by a man living prior to the cross.
If someone could use only a few phrases to describe you, what would they be? My wife and I joke about the episode of the old TV show WKRP In Cincinnati where the radio station’s sales manager, the terminally cheesy and slimy Herb Tarlek, is being profiled on a local television program. He has pounded into everyone how he wants to be represented, and it comically becomes a relentless mantra of untrue characterizations that he himself has scripted for all his colleagues and family members to repeat over and over—hardworking, family man, all-around good guy. That was how he wanted to be perceived; it just wasn’t how he wanted to live.

I prefer Luke’s list. The description he gave of Simeon did not have to be fabricated. It was not a caricature. It was an accurate description of a faithful man who lived a life of devotion.

HIS THRILL OF HOPE
The concept of hope is one that is fraught with peril. It is often fluffy and without substance, having more to do with optimistic wishes than with confident expectation. That is because hope must be attached to something—or, in this case, Someone. Notice how Luke continued to weave Simeon into the
Christmas picture he is creating:

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ (Lk. 2:26).

The simple truth is that the something to which biblical hope is attached is Jesus Christ. This allows the reality of hope to be more than merely a “hope-so” sentimentality. This hope is rugged and strong, with the ability to empower us as we move through life. Hope that is placed in Christ becomes a significant platform from which we can launch out into the deep end of the pool as we trust Him.

Simeon’s hope came from a remarkable promise that the Holy Spirit had given him: Simeon would not see death until he saw the Lord’s Christ.

“The Lord’s Christ” was “the anointed one of the Lord,” the Messiah, the long-awaited hope of the ages. For hundreds and hundreds of years, the Jewish people had comforted one another with the promise of Messiah and found strength in that promise during difficult days. They had cried out for its fulfillment during times of national crisis and had rested quietly in its assurance during days of national prosperity.

Now, after centuries of waiting, a signal was given: Simeon’s life would serve as a line of demarcation in history. If he died, Messiah was alive somewhere on planet earth. But the second part of the promise was even more mind-blowing. Simeon
would not just live until Messiah arrived; he would personally see the Promised One!

This promise radically affected the way Simeon viewed life and the way he lived his life. The impression we get from Luke’s record is that, as a result of this promise, Simeon spent his days in the temple awaiting this promise and living in anticipation of the moment he would see the Messiah of Israel.

__________

Simeon spent his days in the temple awaiting the promise and living in anticipation of the moment he would see the Messiah of Israel.

__________

This was the same anticipation that marked the heart and spiritual passion of hymn writer and poet Fanny Crosby. Blinded in childhood, Crosby had eyes that saw more spiritually than most of us ever see physically. Like Simeon, she lived a life of anticipation as she longed in hope for the time when she would see the King of kings, which prompted her to write words that Simeon would have fully appreciated:

Some day the silver cord will break,
And I no more as now shall sing;
But, oh, the joy when I shall wake
Within the palace of the King!
And I shall see Him face to face,
And tell the story—Saved by grace.

What Fanny Crosby
anticipated in heaven, Simeon was promised on earth—the hope of seeing the Lord’s Christ and the world’s Savior face to face. That is something to be hopeful about!

**HIS SATISFIED HEART**
For months, Taco Bell ran a series of ads promoting their new super-gigantic burritos and tacos by having fairly ordinary people dramatically announcing, “I’m full!” The point of the ad campaign was that “ordinary” fast food couldn’t fill you up. The only way to really satisfy your hunger was with one of their burritos.

Of course, one candy maker would argue that to be truly satisfied you don’t need a 10-pound burrito—you only need one Snickers bar, because, after all, “Snickers really satisfies.”

Then again, many folks would say that their experience is much more like Mick Jagger’s raspy cry, “I can’t get no satisfaction!”

Even King Solomon, with all of his wealth and wisdom, pleasure and prestige, declared that all of life was “vanity”—emptiness. His conclusion? “So I hated life” (Eccl. 2:17).

In a world where satisfaction is hard to find and harder to keep, we are driven to the Christ who said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).
In a world where satisfaction is hard to find and harder to keep, we are driven to the Christ who said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). Jesus offers a life of fullness and abundance—and Simeon was among the very first to experience it.

Notice again the reference to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of this faithful man. The Spirit was with him (Lk. 2:25) and had revealed the promise to him (v.26), and now it was the Holy Spirit who was moving Simeon to the temple so that the promise could be fulfilled.

[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, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, “Now Lord, You are releasing Your bondservant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel” (Lk. 2:27-32).

At the outset, this must have been terrifying for Mary and Joseph. As soon as they entered the temple for the rituals the law required for the birth of a son, out of the shadows stepped a man who took their child from them and began making a proclamation. As bizarre as that might have seemed, what really got their attention was the content of that proclamation. Simeon...
declared the truths that they had quietly held in their own hearts since the angelic messenger had visited them so many months before. He also underlined the message the angel had delivered to the shepherds in the Bethlehem fields. Their reaction would have reasonably been one of shock and surprise.

Simeon’s response, however, was one of absolute satisfaction and contentment. The promise that had driven him for so much of his life had been fulfilled. Messiah had arrived. How could he ever want for anything more? He was actually holding the Christ in his arms! He was looking into the face of God.

Anticipating this moment for years, Simeon must have wondered about the promised encounter. Had he imagined that he would meet the Messiah as

\[ \text{The promise that had driven Simeon for so much of his life had been fulfilled. Messiah had arrived. . . . He was actually holding the Christ in his arms!} \]

a newborn infant? Or had he expected a royal entourage that he would glimpse from a distance? Whatever he had imagined, it could not begin to measure up to what he was blessed to experience. He had seen the Christ—and as a result experienced a fullness of life and satisfaction of heart.
so profound that he declared, in essence, “No more! I don’t need any more! I have seen the Christ. Now, O God, let me depart from this life in peace!”

Mary and Joseph had already witnessed amazing things—angels, shepherds, the star over Bethlehem. Now, added to that was the prophetic praise of a total stranger who proclaimed that his life was complete because he had seen their son. They could only stand there in amazement “at the things which were being said about Him” (Lk. 2:33).

What a fantastic scene it must have been that day in the temple as Mary and Joseph watched a completely contented man do the most meaningful thing he would ever do—celebrate Jesus.

**HIS SOBER ANNOUNCEMENT**

When your doctor tells you, “I have good news and I have bad news, which do you want first?” you get a sudden thud in the pit of your stomach. The first time I heard those words, the good news was that the bloodwork for my medical checkup had come back with an encouraging report: overall, my health was fine. The bad news, however, was a message my body had already been sending me—a message I had chosen to ignore. Due to a hectic travel schedule abroad over several months, where I had found myself eating unusual things at weird times while under stress and pressure, my weight had climbed to a point that was, well, not good. The bad news led to further bad news that
would include a rather severe (in my opinion) diet in order to correct the problem. Good news and bad news often travel together, and much of the time the messages carried by both are far more serious than a personal “battle of the bulge.”

In Simeon’s encounter with Mary and Joseph, he had celebrated the Christ Child and the fulfillment of the promise of God that He represented. Wonderful, miraculous, extraordinary good news. But this good news, by implication, also carried bad news for this young mother who had embarked on an adventure like no other.

What bad news could there be involving the birth of the world’s Savior? Luke gives us the grim answer:

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—and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Lk. 2:34-35).

That grave prophecy reminds us that the Christmas story—the joyous, glorious birth of the Savior—was only a part of the process by which He would save the world. The first steps of the journey brought the most profound joy and happiness, but the final steps would be fulfilled as Mary stood at the foot of the cross watching with tear-stained eyes and broken heart as her Son—the Holy One of Israel—paid for the sins of the world. Simeon’s “bad news” for Mary was
indeed a bitter pill, for the suffering of her Son would cut like a sword to the very depths of her soul.

Simeon’s “bad news” for Mary was indeed a bitter pill, for the suffering of her Son would cut like a sword to the very depths of her soul.

The pain of labor by which she received Him at His birth would be mirrored by the pain she would experience in releasing Him to His sacrificial death.

Mary must have spent the next 30-plus years pondering that prophetic statement as Jesus grew, and, then, as He carried out His public ministry. Perhaps she watched in fear as her Son entered the crowds or debated the religious leaders. Her life would be marked with anticipation, just as Simeon’s had been. But while he had found contentment in the arrival of the Christ, she would feel pain and loss as that same Christ—her Son—suffered and died. Simeon’s lifelong anticipation resulted in joy. Hers ended in grief.

Simeon’s contentment offers us a helpful perspective, especially as we think about the way Christmas is celebrated in our Western culture. The promise had been fulfilled. Simeon had seen and held the Savior. Yet at the heart of his response was a depth of satisfaction...
that can come only by experiencing the personal presence of the Christ.

What of our Christmas? Does our celebration foster gratitude and contentment, or disappointment? Is it marked by the drive to possess, or the quiet peace of knowing that “I am His and He is mine”? The spirit of the age pulls us inexorably toward consumption—especially at Christmas. But the heart of Simeon reminds us that there is more than just having more. There is Christ and His promise of “being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5).

May our celebration of the Christ be defined by the unique contentment of the heart that comes from knowing Him.

THE WITNESS OF ANNA

At age 20, I was working for the natural gas company in our area of West Virginia. My job was in the department of civil engineering, where I worked with crews surveying pipelines, well sites, and plot maps. In January that year, we were dispatched to Fort Gay, West Virginia, to run a survey that would site a core-hole sample location where they wanted to drill for coal, in preparation for an attempted coal-gasification experiment. That winter day, the weather reports said that the winds were gusting up to 80 miles an hour, which, when added to the already brisk temperatures, made for an extremely frigid morning. Since I
was low man in seniority on the team, I was the one who got to leave the warmth of our company vehicle and climb to the top of a railroad bridge to locate the US government benchmark from which we had to begin our survey.

To this day, I’m unclear about what happened next. I have always assumed that one of those 80-mile-per-hour gusts blew through the hollow and knocked me off balance, because the next thing I remember is waking up at the bottom of the ravine in a dry creek bed below the deck of the bridge. I tried to get up and passed out again. The next time I came to, I was in the back of our utility vehicle, headed to a hospital in Huntington, West Virginia, where the emergency room personnel spent the day taking x-rays and trying to figure out why I wasn’t dead. I had fallen 38 feet into a dry creek bed and landed on my neck, yet I had escaped with only a neck sprain and a slightly compressed spine.

I had fallen 38 feet into a dry creek bed and landed on my neck, yet I had escaped with only a neck sprain and a slightly compressed spine.

I was in traction for a week, and on disability wearing a hard C-collar for 3 months. By the time I returned to work, the bosses must have determined that I was a danger to myself and
everyone else, because they moved me from the field crew to the safe confines of the map room. The most vivid memory I have of my hospital stay, however, is not the x-rays or traction, although I gained a bountiful harvest of sermon illustrations from those experiences. What I remember most was one special afternoon. Sharing my hospital room was an elderly gentleman who was already in the other bed when I was admitted. Once I was in traction, I could see nothing but the ceiling, a less-than-wonderful view to have for a week. But several times a day I would hear people (usually hospital staff) come to the door and whisper in hushed voices.

"Is that him?"
"Yes."
"The one who's supposed to be dead?"
"Yes."
"Why didn't the fall kill him?"
"No one knows."

This scene played itself out over and over. Then, one afternoon during visiting hours, as I lay there looking up at the ceiling, I heard the muffled tones of the man in the next bed talking with his wife. It sounded as if they were crying, and I assumed they had gotten some bad news from the doctor. But I couldn't have been more wrong. At the end of visiting hours, the woman came over to my bed and leaned over my face so that she could look me in the eye. She still had tears in her eyes as she said, "My husband told me what happened to you. We are Christians. We believe God spared your life because He..."
wants to use you. We are going to pray for you to that end.” Then she walked away.

I was released soon after that, and I never saw the woman again. But I have never forgotten her or the words she spoke to me that day. To that point in my life, I had done a pretty good job of living for myself. I had grown up in a church where the gospel was not presented, and the thought of taking God seriously, let alone Him being interested in me, was a shock to my system. It caused me to

The thought of taking God seriously, let alone Him being interested in me, was a shock to my system.

start thinking about things I had never considered before. I started attending a church that taught the Bible, and 18 months later I accepted Christ as my Savior and Lord. And it all began with that brief, heartfelt, sincere witness from an elderly woman who didn’t know me from Adam’s housecat. She could have just ignored me, but she compassionately and courageously gave witness to her faith in God and her concern for me. And God used her words of witness to change my life.

When I think of that dear lady (who I look forward to seeing again in heaven), I think of Anna in Luke 2. She too was an older woman, spiritually committed and passionate about giving witness to Christ. I’m so grateful for Anna’s...
presence in the Christmas story, because God used a woman like Anna in my own generation to impact my life so powerfully.

THE WOMAN OF WITNESS
To discover Anna’s perspective on the birth of the Son of God, we must begin by asking, “Who was she?” William Barclay refers to Anna as “one of the Quiet in the Land” because the Scriptures give us little information about her. Yet in only three verses we are given a fascinating snapshot of this woman. Notice how Luke pictures her and her entrance onto the scene:

There was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:36-38).

Only three verses, but they are filled with helpful insights into the woman that Herbert Lockyer labeled, “The Woman Who Became The First Christian Missionary.”

Her Name And Family. The name Anna is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament “Hannah,” a name that means “grace” or “favor.” Anna certainly was favored by seeing the infant Christ and telling of
His arrival on planet earth.

Anna’s father was Phanuel. His name means “the appearance or face of God,” and was derived from the patriarch Jacob’s wrestling with God. After that experience, Jacob renamed the location Peniel, because he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (Gen. 32:30). Phanuel (from Peniel) speaks powerfully of the intimate communion with God that is the privilege of every child of God. The intimacy, the immanence, the nearness, yes, even the accessibility of God—all of those extraordinary ideas reside in that wonderful name by which Anna’s father was known: Phanuel, the “face of God.”

Anna is also described as being from the tribe of Asher. Asher was the eighth son born to Jacob (Israel), and the second by Leah’s handmaid, Zilpah. When he was born, Leah named him Asher, which means “happy.” Bible historians see this as significant because Asher has often been considered one of the so-called “lost tribes of Israel.” Apparently, they were not so lost after all, for in the first century Anna is clearly identified as a member of that tribe.

**Her Life Situation.**

When I was in seminary, it was fashionable to speak about the principle of *sitz im leben*, which is German for “life setting” or “life situation.” To put it simply, in the thinking of some German theologians, all of scriptural study was reduced to this one point: How does the passage apply to the situations
of life? While that is far too general and simplistic an application of the concept, the fact remains that we are surrounded by specific situations that mold and shape us personally. And our responses to those situations that we face mold and shape us as well. We do not live alone on a desert island. We live life in a series of situations that impact who we are becoming in Christ. This was true of Anna as well.

Her life situation was etched in sorrow and marked by perseverance. Widowed after only 7 years of marriage, Anna was apparently left childless—facing a life without joy and a life without significance in her culture. The sorrows of her youth carried on into her old age, for she is described as being 84 years old and having never remarried (although some Bible scholars translate the verse as saying that she lived an additional 84 years after her husband’s death, which would make her about 105 years old).

Anna’s life situation was etched in sorrow and marked by perseverance.

The sorrow of such loss combined with the longevity of life would be a destructive combination for many people, plunging them into a perpetual black hole of despair and self-pity. But such was not the case with Anna. She chose to live positively in the service of her God—
praying, praising, and anticipating His grace. 

**Her Consistent Priorities.** What we are committed to speaks loudly about who we are and what we value. For Anna it was simple: Her priority—her goal—was pleasing God.

Although no prophets had been heard from since the days of Malachi, Anna is called a prophetess. Luke doesn’t describe the nature of her prophetic ministry or the content of her prophetic message, but he offers unquestioned affirmation that she was a spokeswoman for God to her generation. After more than 400 years of prophetic silence, God chose a widow with a heart for Him to reopen His declarative expression to the world. In conjunction with an apparently public prophetic ministry, however, Anna also participated in private worship that testified to a life devoted to God. “She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers,” wrote Luke (2:37). What does that mean?

In *Be Compassionate*, Warren Wiersbe says that Anna was so committed to waiting for the coming of the Lord that she had moved from her homeland with the tribe of Asher to Jerusalem and remained at the temple. Others say it merely means that she was a regular presence at the temple, always attending the services there. Either way, she was a fixture at the house of God and committed to spiritual discipline. Anna’s life was a model of personal devotion, continually
worshiping her God and continually praying and fasting.

This dear woman, whose love for God was the driving force in her life, is painted in brief but powerful words by William Barclay:

She had known sorrow, but she had not grown bitter. She was old, but she had never ceased to hope. She never ceased to worship. She never ceased to pray.

In a life situation that could easily have driven her from God, Anna allowed her heart to be drawn to God. And her years of faithfulness were rewarded, for she was in her customary place (the temple) and maintaining her consistent priorities (worship, prayer, and fasting) when the little family from Nazareth entered the temple to fulfill the demands of

the law required by the birth of Jesus.

THE OCCASION OF HER WITNESS

At critical moments in history when the right person is matched with the right event, remarkable things happen. Such a person was Anna. Prepared by decades of spiritual devotion, she was in the right place at precisely the right time.

At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:38).

“That very moment” is the critical phrase here. In one sense, what Anna was doing was merely the continuation of what she had done for decades—she was going to the
temple to worship. Yet, that is what makes it so remarkable. She had been doing it for some 60 years! Imagine what would have happened had she decided, “I’m tired. I’ve been doing this for years. I think I’ll take the day off and stay home.” But she didn’t! And her faithfulness to God positioned her in the temple at the very moment that Simeon took the Christ Child from Mary’s arms and lifted Him up, declaring Him to be Israel’s long-awaited, long-hoped-for Messiah.

“This was no mere coincidence,” writes Herbert Lockyer in All The Women Of The Bible: Prepared by decades of spiritual devotion, Anna was in the right place at precisely the right time. Through her long pilgrimage, day after day, [Anna] went to the Temple to pray for the coming of the Messiah, and although He seemed to tarry she waited for Him, believing that He would come. Then one day the miracle happened, for as she entered the Temple she heard sounds of exultation and joy proceeding from the inner court, and then from the lips of the venerable Simeon she heard the words, “Now, Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.” Gazing
upon the Holy Child who was none other than her long-looked-for Messiah, Anna, too, was ready to depart in peace and be joined with her husband above (p.31).

I love that! Anna's years of faithfulness had been rewarded in a moment of celebration. In the right place at the right time, she saw the Christ. But she didn't stop with worshiping and giving thanks. She bore witness to what she had seen.

THE MESSAGE OF HER WITNESS
All of her life Anna had been a faithful worshiper and a prophetess, but now her role shifted and she became a missionary. She “began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him [Jesus] to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk. 2:38). As Herbert Lockyer wrote: Anna was one of the godly remnant in Israel who, through centuries, even in the darkest days before Christ came, looked for the Dayspring from on high. Thus, as she heard Simeon’s praise for prophecy fulfilled, she went out to her godly intimates to declare the glad tidings (Ibid.).

Good news is not to be secreted away; it is to be shared. Anna shared the good news boldly, and her good news was: “Redemption has come.”

The New Testament uses several different words that are translated “redemption,” explains James Montgomery Boice in The Christ Of Christmas, and all have to do with the freeing of a slave:
• Agorazo: referring to the agora, or the marketplace, where oftentimes slaves were bought and sold. Once purchased, the slave was . . .

• Exagorazo: bought out of (ex) the marketplace (agora) never to be sold there again. Instead that slave was to be . . .

• Luo: literally, cut loose and given his freedom. In Anna’s message of “glad tidings,” Jerusalem is portrayed as the center of the world. But “the redemption of Israel” also represents the reality of the human condition. The Bible describes every human being as being enslaved by sin and without hope in the world. The Christ proclaimed by Anna, however, had come to set free that lost human race. He came to bring redemption (from luo, to loose), deliverance, and rescue from sin and its penalty. Just as the Old Testament prophet Hosea, out of the depths of redeeming love, went to the slave market to purchase his disgraced wife Gomer and make her his own once more, so also Jesus Christ came to the slave market of this broken world and purchased His bride with a redemption sufficient for the sins of the entire world.

Anna’s message was
one of hope, joy, and freedom. After decades of anticipating the coming of the Redeemer King, she now found herself living in a world where this Christ had finally come. The promise had been fulfilled, so she gave thanks and went out to tell anyone who would listen that freedom and forgiveness and redemption were now available, for Christ had come. It is the message that missionaries have been taking to the uttermost parts of the earth ever since.

Looking through Anna’s window, we see a reminder from the prophetess of the truth and meaning behind all of the chaos and confusion that we amiably call Christmas. “Christmas is not merely the story of the birth of a helpless baby in a stable,” writes James Montgomery Boice, “as beautiful as that may be, not the wonder of the shepherds, not the gifts of the wise men, not the enraptured singing of the angel chorus. The heart of Christmas lies in the fact that, ‘God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life’” (Jn. 3:16).

In the midst of all “the
stuff” that surrounds our celebration of Christmas, it is far too easy to forget that the first Christmas happened because our sin demanded payment—and only Christ Himself could make a payment sufficient to cancel our debt.

While it may be fun to celebrate the holiday with gifts and ornaments and candles and parties, “the holy day” of Christmas is really about rescue and redemption. Anna knew that, and she told her world.

May we be willing to make part of our celebration of the birth of Christ a commitment to tell our world as well, for the world needs to know, according to hymn writer J. Wilbur Chapman, that . . .

Living, He loved me; Dying, He saved me; Buried, He carried my sins far away;

Rising, He justified freely, forever; One day He’s coming—O glorious day!

THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

Fred Rogers, the longtime host of the PBS children’s program Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, said, “I like to compare the holiday season with the way a child listens to a favorite story. The pleasure is in the familiar way the story begins, the anticipation of familiar turns it takes, the familiar moments of suspense, and the familiar climax and ending.”

In the story of Christ’s coming, however, the long-awaited ending was just the beginning. His ultimate purpose was not merely to come and live, but to come and die—then
live again. His coming was the earthly beginning of a mission that had been launched in the eternity of God—a mission of rescue for a lost race of people. And He accomplished that mission fully, as the apostle Paul would write to the ancient church at Corinth:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

For those who, by faith, acknowledge their sin and accept the forgiveness that Christ's cross and resurrection have purchased, a new anticipation has begun. It's the anticipation of eternal life.

This anticipation is not the kind of wishful thinking that drove our Christmas anticipations as children. It is a strong anticipation rooted in the God who promised a Deliverer and then sent Him; the God who promises forgiveness and provides it; the God who promises an eternal home to all who put their faith in His Son.

If you have not trusted in the Savior and received the forgiveness He offers, turn to Him today. His love and peace are far, far greater than any gift you could ever anticipate.

This booklet is excerpted from Windows On Christmas by Bill Crowder, which is published by Discovery House Publishers, a member of the RBC Ministries family. Bill, who spent 20 years in pastoral ministry, is now Director of Church Ministries and an associate Bible teacher for RBC Ministries. He and his wife Marlene have five children.

©2010 RBC Ministries
Our mission is to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.

Discovery Series presents the truth of Jesus Christ to the world in balanced, engaging, and accessible resources that show the relevance of Scripture for all areas of life. All Discovery Series booklets are available at no cost and can be used in personal study, small groups, or ministry outreach.

To partner with us in sharing God’s Word, click this link to donate. Thank you for your support of Discovery Series resources and Our Daily Bread Ministries.

Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable Our Daily Bread Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.

CLICK TO DONATE