

Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Luke 2:21-35

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

Let me invite you to take your hymnals in hand ...we'll turn to the Scriptures in just a few moments, but take your hymnals in hand and turn with me to No. 196. After the sermon today as we close our service in praise, we're going to sing the first and the fourth stanzas of *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, those two stanzas in this hymn written by Charles Wesley.

This is the first Sunday morning message in our "Songs of Christmas" series, and if you haven't gotten information about that and you're visiting with us today, there are red cards with information about this series that will be on Wednesday evenings, and Sunday morning and Sunday evening throughout the month of December. You can find them in the tract racks around the church or at the exits, and I'd invite you to take a copy and look and see what we're going to be studying.

We're going to be looking at familiar carols: carols which we all know and love; carols which are rich with biblical truth about the birth, about the incarnation of Jesus Christ and about its meaning, and about its significance for us.

But of course, we're not going to be expounding carols or songs! It's the business of the pulpit of this congregation to expound the word of God, so it perhaps is appropriate that I pause and give you some explanation as to what we are going to do. There are three things in particular that we want to do.

The first is we want you to understand the beautiful poetry of the familiar words of the carols that you sing year after year. We want you to understand them better. Perhaps Christmas carols are among the songs that we sing most frequently, the ones that we have most memorized—at least the first stanza of many of our familiar Christmas carols, we know by heart. And when you know a song by heart, one of the temptations you have is to sing it without ever thinking once what you're singing to the Lord. And so, by giving some time to understand exactly the significance of the beautiful poetry in these carols, we hope to enrich your worship of the living God as you worship Lord's Day after Lord's Day.

Secondly, however, we want these carols to serve as windows onto the biblical story. These carols, most of them, are designed to poetically express truths based directly on particular Scripture passages, especially out of the gospels

about the birth and infancy of Jesus Christ and its significance for us as His redeemed people. And so, we want to use these carols as windows onto that glorious redemptive story contained in the word of God.

But more than that, and thirdly, we want the Scriptures to illuminate particular poetic expressions of biblical truth that we sing in these carols. We not only want to understand the words better; we not only want to use the carols as a window onto the biblical story, but thirdly and most importantly, we want our understanding of what God says in Scripture to enrich the praises and petitions that we lift up to Him through this beautiful poetry found in these familiar and beloved carols.

And so I want you to take Hymn No. 196 and look at the first and the fourth stanzas, the stanzas written by Charles Wesley—it was probably one of the first hymns that he wrote. It was published in a collection of hymns in 1744 called, *Hymns on The Nativity of Our Lord*, and so their theme was the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want you to note how rich these two stanzas are with biblical, with scriptural truth. In fact, I want to suggest to you that in these two stanzas alone of this carol, there are sixteen distinct scriptural allusions, or biblical thoughts, to be found in just these two stanzas. If you will look, there are eight phrases in the first stanza, and there are eight phrases in the second stanza, and each of them contains a beautiful allusion to biblical truth.

First there are the words, “Come, Thou long-expected Jesus.” That asks us to look at the first coming of Christ from the perspective of an Old Testament saint. For the Old Testament saint, Jesus’ first coming has not yet occurred, and so we are asked to take the position of an Old Testament saint, not unlike Simeon in the passage from Luke that we’re going to read today, and look at the coming of Christ with a longing expectation that the Messiah is coming into the world.

But there is a delightful irony in Charles Wesley’s very first words. He says: “Come, Thou long-expected...Jesus.” That is a name that the Old Testament saint did not have the privilege of knowing. The Old Testament saint longed for the coming of Messiah, but he didn’t know that Messiah would be Jesus, and as new covenant saints we have the privilege of calling upon the name of the person of the Messiah. We sing the name of the Messiah back to God, whereas the old covenant saint could only look forward to His coming. “Come, Thou long-expected Jesus....” There’s the first theological idea.

Secondly, “...born to set Thy people free.” Here Wesley tells you what Jesus came for. He came as a redeemer. He came as a deliverer. He came to buy His people back from their bondage, and so the work of the Redeemer was that of deliverer: to “set His people free.”

Thirdly, look at the phrase “From our sins and fears release us...” Here Wesley tells you what Jesus came to deliver us from: from our sin, from our guilt, from

our fear of condemnation. Jesus the Messiah, our Savior, came to deliver us from sin and misery, and from the dread of God's judgment.

Fourthly, he says "...let us find our rest in Thee." There Wesley is asking us to make sure that the hope of our salvation is in Jesus the Messiah alone. The only place that we have to go for refuge, for rest, for redemption from our sins is in Jesus Christ, and we sing it in that phrase, "...let us find our rest in Thee."

"Israel's strength and consolation..." is the fifth phrase in the first stanza, and this reminds us that Jesus is the fulfillment of all those Old Testament messianic prophecies promising that one day Messiah would come and strengthen, and comfort and restore God's ancient people, Israel. And so Wesley has us acknowledging that Jesus the Messiah is Israel's strength and consolation.

But not only that, look at the sixth phrase: "Hope of all the earth art Thou." In other words, Jesus is not only the Redeemer of God's ancient people Israel, He is the hope of the Gentiles, of all peoples. He is Savior, as Paul would say, "...of both Jew and Greek." He is the Savior of Israel and of the Gentiles.

In fact, this theme continues on in the seventh phrase of the first stanza: "Dear Desire of every nation..." Here Wesley is reminding us that Jesus the Messiah is the one, the only one, who can answer the need, the deepest need, of every land and every people. He is the only hope of salvation for every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

And finally, in the eighth phrase of the first stanza, he says "...Joy of every longing heart." And there Wesley is telling us that Jesus is the joyful answer to the heart longing for peace with God. If there is a heart that longs for peace with God, for reconciliation with God, for communion to be restored with God, Jesus is the only one who can give a heart that joy.

Notice the richness of those biblical ideas. All of them are derived from Scripture.

Now look at stanza four, and we'll continue on.

The ninth idea that we see in Wesley's two stanzas is found in this phrase: "...born, Thy people to deliver." He's saying there that Jesus the Messiah was born. He became a human. He was incarnate for the purpose of our redemption. That was the purpose of his being born into this world.

The tenth phrase, in the very next words, "...born a child, and yet a king..." presents one of those ironies of the Christmas story, doesn't it? Jesus, though He is born as a child—obscure, un-looked for by His contemporaries—was yet the king of His people. "Born a child, and yet a king."

Then we see an eleventh statement: He was “born to reign in us forever.” Jesus’ work was to establish His reign, His rule, in His people. His purpose was to establish the reign of God in us.

Next, “...now Thy gracious kingdom bring.” When we pray the Lord's Prayer together, as we did this morning, one of the things that we pray to God is “Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” This is a like petition: Thy gracious kingdom bring. It's a petition for Jesus’ reign to come in us now. We're saying, ‘Lord Jesus, come and reign among us. Come and reign in us now.’”

The next phrase is: “...by Thine own eternal Spirit...” There is a recognition on Wesley's part that if Christ is going to reign in us, the only way He's going to reign in us is through the work of the Holy Spirit. And so, he petitions the Holy Spirit to work in us to establish the reign of Jesus Christ.

The next phrase is: “...rule in all our hearts alone.” That's a petition for Christ to be the only Lord in the lives of all His people. Many of us struggle sometimes. We profess Christ; we trust in Christ for salvation, and yet we find our hearts wanting to go the way of the world and of the flesh, and of the devil. And here Wesley is giving us words whereby we petition for the sole sovereignty of Christ in our lives: that He would be the only Lord; that we would live as if He were our only master; and that this would be true in the lives of all His people. “Rule in all our hearts alone...”

The fifteenth petition is: “By Thine all-sufficient merit...” There we find in that phrase a petition for God to save His people by the merit of Jesus Christ. And it's one of my favorite phrases in all of this Christmas carol. It acknowledges that only Jesus’ work, only Jesus’ perfection, only His perfect obedience can save us. Our merits cannot save us, they will only condemn us; our works cannot save us, they will only condemn us. But Christ's work, Christ's fulfillment of the Law, Christ's perfect life, Christ's death on our behalf fulfilling the penal sanctions of the Law—these things save us, and so we sing this petition: “Lord, save us by Thine all-sufficient merit.”

And then finally, the sixteenth phrase: “Raise us to Thy glorious throne.” This calls on Christ, by His own merit and grace, to completely save us and to bring us into everlasting communion with the living God. And when we sing those two stanzas of this glorious Christmas carol after the service, all of those ideas are wrapped up; so, you see why you have to understand what you're singing ahead of time, because the thoughts fly by as you lift them up in praise and petition to God. But how rich are the biblical ideas of that Christmas carol!

I wish we had time today to expound each of those sixteen biblical truths—but don't worry, we're not! We're going to look at three particular truths that are found

among those sixteen ideas based on Scripture: Luke, chapter two, verse twenty-one. Turn with me there.

I want you to see three themes: the theme of Jesus' fulfillment of the Law; the theme of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of God; and the theme of the necessity of faith in Jesus.

Before we look at this passage, let's look to God in prayer and ask for His blessing.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for this word, and we thank You for this beautiful carol, so filled with scriptural truth. We pray that You would help us by Your Spirit to understand the truth of Your word and to respond to it in faith this day. These things we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Hear God's word from Luke 2:21ff.

And when the eight days were completed before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice according to that was said in the Law of the Lord, "A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." 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. 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 carry out for Him to custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,

"Now Lord, Thou dost let Thy bond-servant depart
In peace, according to Thy word;
For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,
Which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A light of revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Thy people Israel."

And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. 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—and a sword will pierce even your own soul—to the that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Three things I want you to see in this great passage today.

I. Jesus fulfilled the law of God, the Torah, and the Torah has its fulfillment in Him.

First, if you'll look at verses 21-24, here we see Luke emphasizing Jesus' fulfillment of the laws of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers; and, more particularly, Jesus' fulfillment of the laws of God for us. Here in verses 21-24, Luke is reminding us that from His very infancy, Jesus fulfilled the Law of God. His parents had Him circumcised according to the Law, on the eighth day. His parents observed the laws of purification set forth in the laws of Moses. His parents brought Him to the temple to dedicate Him to the Lord as the first-born, just as God had commanded through Moses in the Book of Exodus, and made provision for in the Books of Leviticus and Numbers.

The point that Luke is making is that Jesus fulfilled all the Law of God—the Torah of God, the instruction of God—and that that Law was ultimately fulfilled in Him. Notice how many times Luke repeats the phrase "the Law." He speaks of the law of Moses in verse 22; the Law of the Lord in verse 23; and, the Law of the Lord again in verse 24. He's driving home a point: that Jesus fulfilled not only bearing the penalty of the Law in His death, but that He fulfilled the Law in His life by His obedience to it, even from the time of His infancy.

Why is this so important? Because Jesus' obedience to the Law, both actively and passively... both perceptively (obeying the precepts of the law) and penalty (being punished for the breaking of the Law) by His people...that is the basis of our salvation. He fulfilled the Law for us completely. Were we to stand before God and be measured by our fulfillment of the Law, every single one of us would be condemned. But Luke is reminding you here and he will continue to remind you throughout his gospel, that Jesus fulfilled the Law in the place of all who trusted in Him.

Did you notice how Charles Wesley reminds us of that glorious truth in the fourth stanza of the hymn? It's in that fifteenth phrase: "By Thy all-sufficient merit..." By Jesus' merit, by His fulfilling of the whole Law actively and passively, we are raised to the glorious throne of God. So there's the first theme: Jesus fulfills the whole Law for us.

II. Simeon was waiting for the long-expected Messiah.

Secondly, look at verses 25-32. Here we see Simeon waiting for the long-expected Messiah, and God has told him by revelation that he will not die until he sees the One who is the anointed of the Lord: the Messiah, the Christ, the One who will redeem Israel. And Simeon lives in the hope of the fulfillment of the promises of God, for since Genesis 3:15 and Genesis 12:1-3, and Genesis 15, and Genesis 17, the people of God for literally thousands of years have been waiting for the One who is the “seed of the woman”; the One who was the Messiah, the anointed of God, who would come and deliver His people.

And Simeon here has the privilege of holding this child. Mary and Joseph come into the temple; they are intercepted by this godly and devout man, who holds the child in his arms and sings a song of praise to God, saying, ‘Lord, you can let me die in peace now, because You have fulfilled Your word, and my eyes...’ (notice what he says in verses 30-31)...’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.’”

Do you see what Simeon says there? He says, ‘Lord, I am holding now in my arms the One who is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, and I understand now why You have allowed these filthy Romans to invade and occupy and rule in this land. You have brought the nations to the land of Your people, so that when Your Son was brought into the world it would be seen that He was not only the Savior of Israel, but that He was the Savior of the nations. I'm understanding Your providence, O God. You caused Your Son to be brought into the world at a time when He could be brought into the world in the presence of all the nations that are right here, occupying Israel right now. And He is the salvation for both Israel and for those Gentiles.’

And did you notice how Charles Wesley so beautifully captures that truth in the first stanza, in the second part of the first stanza, when he sings, “Come, Thou long-expected Jesus...Israel's hope and consolation, hope of all the earth Thou art...” He's the Savior of both Israel and of all the earth. Jesus fulfills the promises of God to Israel and to the Gentiles, and Jesus' coming in the fullness of time even explains God's providence in allowing Israel to be occupied by this invading Roman force.

And if Simeon can wait in hope and faith for the coming, the first coming of the Messiah, so ought we to wait expectantly for the second coming of the Messiah; because, my friends, as blessed a thing as it was for Simeon to hold the Christ, the Messiah, as a child in his arms, you understand, of course, that you know far more about that Christ than Simeon ever did. Simeon went to the grave not knowing that the Messiah would lay down His life for His people. He went to the grave not knowing that He would be raised from the dead for the life of His people; that He would ascend on high, leading captivity captive, and that He

would be sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, ever living to intercede.

Simeon knew nothing of this! And yet, he trusted in God. You know all of that. When you hold those Gospels in your hands; when you read Matthew, Mark and Luke and John; when you sing carol after carol in this season, you will be rehearsing truths to which Simeon was not privileged. You have every reason to continue to live in expectant hope, trusting in the second coming of the long-expected Messiah, who promised His people that He would come again with clouds and glory descending.

III. Jesus is the dividing point of history, humanity and salvation.

One last thing: look at verses 33-34, because there we learn that Jesus is the dividing point of history. He's the dividing point of humanity. He's the dividing point of salvation. And here we are reminded of the necessity of faith in Jesus the Messiah as our only Lord and Savior. Notice what Simeon says to Mary in verse 34: Mary, "...this child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed..."

You know, there's nothing cute about this story, is there? It could be tempting during this year to be purely sentimental about the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ—this cute little baby in a manger. But here Simeon says, 'Mary, let me tell you about this boy. He has been appointed by God for the rising and falling of many in Israel. Those who accept Him, who embrace Him as Messiah, who trust in Him alone for salvation, they will be ushered into the fullness of the blessings and kingdom of God. But, Mary, those who reject Him, those who are indifferent to Him, those who spurn Him, they will be cast out. They will be judged. They will be condemned, for He has been appointed for both the rising and the falling of many in Israel.

My friends, Jesus is not just a cute little baby in a manger. He is the only hope of salvation, and if we accept Him, we will live; but if we reject Him, it is certain that we will die.

And Simeon is saying that even to this dear mother, as he hands the baby back to her in the temple precincts; and it reminds us, my friends, that as we sing and as we hear these familiar and beautiful and beloved passages read over and over during Christmas time, that our business is to respond in faith to these words. For these are not simply stories to bring back memories of our youth, fond reflections of times gone by of family and kin gathered around a tree, or a meal, or a fellowship.

These words are given to us as the words of life, and those who believe in them will live now and forevermore. And those who reject them will not. May God enable us to respond in faith throughout this season to God's word. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bless You for the giving of the gift of the long-expected Messiah, Jesus. Grant that by Your Spirit we would believe on Him as He is offered in the gospel for salvation. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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