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### Introduction

Some people go all out when decorating their homes for Christmas, and not only on the inside, but on the outside. For example, a home owner in Kansas City, Missouri, thought he had the best Christmas decorations ever – that is until he had to take them down. Check out this picture [insert picture]. It appears that the home owner was putting up Christmas lights on the second story roof line of this home when the ladder slipped out from beneath him and left him hanging from the guttering. Here’s what the homeowner wrote:

“The good news is that I truly out did myself this year with my Christmas decorations. The bad news is that I had to take him down after 2 days. I had more people come screaming up to my house than ever. Great stories. But two things made me take it down. First, the cops advised me that it would cause traffic accidents as they almost wrecked when they drove by. Second, a 55 year old lady grabbed the 75 pound ladder almost killed herself putting it against my house and didn't realize it was fake until she climbed to the top (she was not happy). By the way, she was one of many people who attempted to do that. My yard couldn't take it either. I have more than a few tire tracks where people literally drove up my yard. Not everyone thought it was so funny. When I wasn't home, some people would go yell at my neighbors. I guess they needed someone to yell at. Another guy smashed our pumpkins that we had up as decoration for Thanksgiving. Some people would write us nasty letters. But all and all, most people really liked it.”

It looks like people needed to take a closer look at the guy hanging from the roof! That story is going to speak to us as we work through This Story, particularly in Luke 2. This weekend, we are in a section of the birth story of Jesus that often is overlooked. Yet, when we look it over, there is a great discovery to be enjoyed. Soon after the shepherds saw the newborn Jesus and returned to their nearby fields, the story continues with this.

### Luke 2:21-24

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived. 22 When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

### Joseph, Mary & Jesus

When Jesus was eight days old, his parents took him to be circumcised, as stated in the Old Testament Law. Genesis 17:12 commanded parents to circumcise infant boys when they were eight days old because clotting factors developed in the infant boy by then. Any time sooner and the baby boy would have bled to death. So, Mary and Joseph did as the Word commanded them, and they would have either taken Him

to a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem or to a rabbi in a synagogue for the ritual because circumcision was both a physical and spiritual act. Then, after another month passed, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple in Jerusalem for two purposes: 1) purification of Mary (offering a sacrifice), and 2) consecration (i.e., dedication) of the first born. After a woman gave birth to a son, she was homebound until a month had passed. Circumcision. Purification. Consecration. These were not mere rituals. They were acts of worship.

Now think this through. Peek around the corner of these verses. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Later in the story (verse 39), Joseph, Mary and Jesus return to their home in Nazareth. Nazareth was some 75 miles from Bethlehem. When Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to register for the census, Mary was extremely pregnant and the walk would easily take ten or more days. So, they would not have been going back and forth from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Christmas cards portray Mary riding on a donkey, yet there is no biblical support of that. It was possible, but we must remember that Joseph and Mary were very poor, as Joseph was a *tekton*, worker of wood. For more than a month, Joseph lived away from home. They were cut off from family and friends. How did they accomplish such a feat being financially strapped? Did the owner of the barn allow them to stay? Did someone open their home to the newlyweds and their baby? Did Joseph take on some carpentry work in order for his young family to survive? Keep in mind that the two doves or pigeons is an indication that Joseph and Mary were poor, indeed, as Leviticus 12:6-8 stated a lamb was to be sacrificed and if the woman was too poor and could not afford a lamb, pigeons or doves were permitted.

So, rather than overlook this part of the story, we discover something as we look it over. Joseph and Mary had a rough go of it. They suffered. In the midst of some rough, difficult times, Mary and Joseph turned to God and did what God asked of them.

#### **Luke 2:25-35**

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." 33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

#### Simeon

This is the only time and place in the Bible where this Simeon is mentioned. He is a godly man, having lived his life in such a way as to be highly respected by others (i.e., which is the meaning of "righteous and devout"). He was "waiting for the consolation" of Israel. The word consolation is from a Greek word meaning "to comfort." Simeon—and other Jews like him—were waiting for the nation of Israel to be comforted.

Simeon—and Israel—were struggling. Nationally, the country was in bondage to Rome, and King Herod ruled Israel with an iron fist. Herod hated anyone who became a threat to him (i.e., killing all boys in the

vicinity of Bethlehem two years of age and younger). Morally, Israel was struggling under the legalism of the Pharisees and the materialism of the Sadducees. Spiritually, Israel was struggling in that God had not spoken for the last four hundred years—since the time of Malachi.

Hence, Simeon lived in joyful anticipation, thinking, “This could be the day!” He was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, and the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would see the Messiah with his own eyes before his eyes were closed by death. That divine appointment came about as the Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go to the Temple Courts on the same day and at the same time as Joseph and Mary were there with Baby Jesus. Once Simeon saw the Messiah in Mary’s arms, he “praised God,” and took Him in his arms. After praising God, Simeon prophesied to Joseph and Mary that there would be difficult days ahead, not only for the nation, but even for Mary (i.e., “a sword pierce your own soul, too”).

Again, rather than overlook this part of the story, we discover something as we look it over. Simeon—and the entire nation—suffered. In the midst of some tough, difficult times, Simeon waited on God to come through—and God did. Even though the Messiah had now arrived, suffering did not—nor would it—leave. Hold that thought.

#### **Luke 2:36-40**

36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

#### Anna

Like Simeon, this is the only mention of aged Anna, a prophetess. As a prophetess, she did not tell the future; rather, God had Anna speak His Word. She was old—very old. The passage can be interpreted to mean that she was an 84 year-old widow, or she was widowed for 84 years after having been married for seven years, and if she had been married in her teen years, that would make Anna about one hundred years old! Like Joseph, Mary and Simeon, Anna was in the midst of a struggle or two. The fact that she never left the Temple is an indication that she may have lived there. Why would she live there? She likely had no children to care for her in her old age, and she was cared for by the benevolent program at the Temple. Like Simeon, she was “looking forward to the redemption of Israel.” Redemption was a rescue. When a person was sold into slavery, they were redeemed when someone who loved them came to their rescue. Anna was waiting for the Messiah to come and redeem Israel, to rescue the nation from its bondage.

#### **Segue**

Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna all had something in common, and that something was that they were living in time and place of suffering. Each of these four individuals struggled from day to day, and even from year to year. Suffering had become a way of life for them, and for the entire nation of Israel. It was as if suffering hung heavy in the air.

Think with me for a moment. There are songs we hear at that this time of year that emphasize how we should be feeling. For example, the lyrics of one song begin, “It’s that time of year when the world falls in

love..." Well, not everyone is falling in love—some are falling out of love." Another song declares, "Joy to the world," but not everyone knows and feels joy at this time of year. For some, it is not "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," so much as it is, "Joy to the world, cancer has come—or death, job loss, foreclosure, addiction, divorce, etc. People are looking for hope, and not only personally, but nationally. As we approach the next presidential election, it is obvious that Americans are struggling with many issues. Violence is real from coast to coast, as is the threat of terrorism. ISIS isn't isolated half a world away. ISIS is infiltrating the lives and lands of people around the globe. Our national debt soars beyond calculation, while our budget deficits are out of control.

Suffering still hangs heavy in the air. It is like a thick emotional smog and we are in need of climate change. Climate change is all the rage right now; countries needing to work together to battle smog that increasingly envelops the world. Even when working together, countries will be able to help people cope with the smog, but they will not be able to completely eradicate it.

In the same way, there is an emotional smog of suffering that grips the world. We will never be able to eradicate suffering from the world, but we can do some climate change in hopes of coping with the smog of suffering. How do we practice climate change when suffering hangs heavy in our lives? The answer lies in the lives of Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna. All four of them responded to suffering in the same way. They did not turn to King Herod for help. Their hope was not in the wise men who came from the East with costly gifts for the baby shower of Jesus. Their hope was anchored in God, and it was seen in their acts of worship.

Mary and Joseph took Jesus to be circumcised. That was worship. Mary offered a sacrifice for her purification. That was worship. Joseph consecrated his Son to God. That was worship. Simeon was in the Temple, and when he saw Jesus and held Him in his arms, Simeon praised God. That was worship. Anna never left the Temple, worshipping day and night, fasting and praying. That was worship. How did they clear the smog of suffering hanging heavy in their lives? They worshipped God! And we must do the same. Worship is not simply singing some songs and listening to a sermon. Worship is more, much more. It is a way of life. Worship is ascribing worth to God, acknowledging that He—and He alone—is our living God and there is no other.

Consider Job. When his life suddenly was smothered with the smog of suffering, Job turned to God—in worship! "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised'" (Job 1:20-21). Job did not worship in a church service, singing songs and listening to a sermon. He fell with his face to the ground. He bowed before God, acknowledging that God was in control; that life was not about himself, but about God.

Think with me. We can easily get caught up in a "me-myself-and-I" way of thinking, and when we do, we focus on our pain and suffering. We tend to see everything that is wrong with life, particularly with ours. We buy into a "woe-is-me" way of living, and when we do, it has something to do with worship—but not the worship of God. Check this out.

#### **Isaiah 14:12-14**

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of the assembly, on

the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.”

The context of this passage is that it was a prophecy against Babylon (see Isaiah 13:1). But, remember that a passage like this in the Old Testament can have a broader understanding and meaning. This sounds like Satan and his eventual demise. Not once, but five times, Satan declared “I will ascend...” After Satan witnessed the creation, he wanted to be just like God. In Job 38:7, he was numbered among the angels who sang for joy while God created the universe and everything in it. Satan’s greatest desire was to be noticed, to turn heads, to be lifted up; to be worshipped. He wanted to take from God what was rightfully and solely His! Satan wanted to divert worship of God away from God and redirect it towards himself. What was God’s immediate response? “I will bring you down!” (vs. 15).

That’s us. We are no different. Why? Not only do we have a sinful nature with us like that which was first in Adam and Eve, but moreover, our sinful nature has its origin in Satan! Like Satan, we redirect worship towards us that is meant first and solely for God. God created us with voices, with lungs, with hands and with feet. We use our lungs and voices to cheer on our favorite teams to the end zone or the basket. We stomp our feet and clap our hands in response to our favored team scoring. Why not use our voices and our lungs, our hands and our feet, along with our minds to worship God? On average, each person takes some 23,000 breaths a day, and with each breathe, a very complex exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide takes place—which we take for granted. What would it take for God to take our breath away in worship of Him?

Worship is about God, not us. Life is about God, not about us. God is extra-ordinary, not us. It’s God’s kingdom, not ours. He is the One to be worshipped, and when we worship Him—24/7—we experience climate change. Though suffering remains, it no longer smothers us because we wait and watch for Him, as did Simeon. We walk with God, as did Anna. We surrender to Him, as did Joseph and Mary. Joy to the world, the Lord has come—and He’s coming again. *Don’t let what’s wrong with life keep us from worshipping what’s right with God!*

Scientists at Stanford University are doing some research to see if they can reverse the aging process. What they discovered is that blood from young mice was pumped into older mice, a burst of brain cell growth took place in the part of the brain that first begins to deteriorate in the aging process. Stanford scientists are infusing older people with Alzheimer’s with the blood plasma of younger people, all in hopes of enabling those who are older to live still longer. Now stop and think. Life’s not about living longer, it’s about living eternally. Eternal life is found in blood, but it matters whose blood it is!

At the beginning of the message, I showed the picture of the fake guy hanging from the roof as a novel Christmas decoration. As they drove past the house, people screeched to a halt, thinking that the manikin was a real guy. They needed to take a closer look at the guy hanging from the roof. Moreover, in this busy time of year—a season when some of us are smothered with the smog of suffering—we need to come to a screeching halt and take a closer look at the One who hung on a cross.

It looks like people needed to take a closer look at the guy hanging from the roof! This Christmas, we need to take a look at a guy hanging—and he wasn’t hanging from a roof, but a cross—and His name is none other than Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, is our hope that clears the smog of suffering—even at Christmas.

Worship Him.

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