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Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 8

1. **Can You Hear The Holy Spirit?**
by Joseph Tkach
2. **The Power Of Intent**
by Randal Dick
3. **Ordinary People Change The World**
by Randal Dick
4. **What Child Is This**
by Michael Morrison

Something worth thinking about

by Joseph Tkach

Study Supplement No. 8

Can you hear the Holy Spirit?

When the church in Antioch gathered for worship, the Holy Spirit spoke to them: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Does the Holy Spirit speak to us today? Can we hear what he says to us today?

Paul tells us that those who are led by the Holy Spirit are the children of God (Romans 8:14). We should expect the Holy Spirit to lead us, and we need to know how he does it.

In different ways

God works in different ways with different people. He spoke in different ways to Adam, Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Samuel, Elijah, Mary and Paul. He can speak in different ways to us today. The messages given to Philip (Acts 8:29) and Peter are so specific (Acts 10:19) that distinct words may have been involved. But he spoke in a different way at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). It is only after all the discussion had taken place that the apostles concluded that the Holy Spirit had made the decision for them (verse 28).

Just as the Holy Spirit decides to give different abilities to different people (1 Corinthians 12:11), he works with us in different ways. A person with the gift of miraculous words is likely to hear the Spirit in a different way than a person with the gift of compassion. The Spirit will lead a teacher in a different way than a server, because he has different jobs for each person.

The Spirit shapes us in different ways, and as a result, we value different goals. Someone with the gift of administration will value order and organization; someone with the gift of serving will ask whether people are being helped; someone with the gift of encouragement will focus on peoples' attitudes; people with the gift of generosity will look for needs that they can fill. And the Spirit works with us in the way that he has caused us to be, according to our interests and values.

For some people, he speaks subtly, in general principles; for others, he must speak with unmistakable details. Each of us must listen in the way that God has made us, in the way that he chooses to deal with us. The important thing is that we listen—that we are ready and willing to hear what he says. We should be looking for his leadership rather than ignoring it.

Dangers

There are several dangers to take into account. First, all sorts of people have claimed to hear the Holy Spirit when he didn't really speak to them. They have made false prophecies, given foolish advice, led people into cults and made Christianity look bad. If God spoke to them, they badly misunderstood what he was saying. So there's a danger of "hearing" things that God never said. We should be careful, for we do not want to use his name in vain.

A second danger is that some people, afraid of hearing incorrectly, refuse to hear anything at all. But as Dallas Willard has pointed out, we should not "shun the genuine simply because it resembled the counterfeit" (Hearing God, p. 88). Our Father in heaven does speak to us, and the Holy Spirit does lead us, and we will short-change ourselves if we close our ears.

Hebrews 3:7 says that the Spirit speaks in the words of Scripture, and we should not refuse to follow what he says. He does communicate to us today, convicting us of what we should do, guiding us in how we serve God.

A third danger is that some people seek the Holy Spirit for selfish reasons. They want the Spirit to make their decisions for them, to tell them what job to take, which person to

marry, when to move and how to live. They want the Holy Spirit to be like a Ouija board or a horoscope, to save them the trouble of thinking and making decisions.

But God wants us to grow in maturity, to learn through experience what is right and wrong (Hebrews 5:12-14). And many of the decisions we face are not matters of sin and righteousness—they are simply choices, and God can work with us no matter which we choose, so he leaves the choice up to us. So the Holy Spirit doesn't speak on everything we want him to.

Some people would like to have the Holy Spirit as a conversational companion to keep them company. They want to chat, but the Holy Spirit isn't involved in idle words. He does not call attention to himself (John 15:26), and is often silent because he has already given us enough information and advice. He wants us to use what he has already given; he has been training our conscience to respond rightly to what faces us. That does not mean that we rely on ourselves, but that we rely on what God has already done in our lives and what he has already taught us.

Scripture

The Holy Spirit speaks to us primarily through the Scriptures that he inspired to be written and canonized. This is our foundation of faith and life, the word that everyone has access to, the word that can be studied and discussed most objectively. Often the word that we need to hear has already been written, and the Spirit simply needs to bring it to mind. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, for example, his responses were quoted from Scripture. He had studied and memorized those words, and in each situation the Spirit led him to the appropriate response.

The Spirit does not bypass our need to think, or our need to read and meditate on his words. If we are not seeking the words he has already given in Scripture, then we should not expect him to suddenly give us new words for new situations. Nor can we expect the random-access method of Scripture skimming to provide good answers for difficult questions. We cannot force, coerce or goad the Spirit to speak when he does not choose to speak.

With Scripture, there is the potential for nearly constant communication with God, as we read and pray and live consciously in God's presence. As we pray, we should also listen, for God may use our meditations to help us understand what we should do. We have the responsibility to read and study, for the Spirit usually works with words that are already in our minds. He works with our vocabulary, with our ways of reasoning, with the desires and values he has given us.

The devil can use Scripture, too, and the Bible is often misunderstood and misused. But it is still an important means of being led by and hearing the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the standard of comparison for all other words from God. If we think that the Spirit is leading us to do something, our first question needs to be, "Is this in agreement with Scripture?" The Spirit does not contradict himself. He does not lead us to lie, steal, gossip or be greedy, for he has already told us that those things are not godly.

So if we think the Spirit is leading us in one direction, we need to check it with Scripture—and the only way we can do that is to know what Scripture says. We need to study it, and since we will never know it all, we need to keep studying it. Memorization can be helpful, but what we need most of all is understanding. We need to see the principles of salvation, of Christian living, of divine love, of the way that God works with his people; that will help us understand how he is working with us.

Experience

We can also hear the Holy Spirit through experience. God sometimes changes his methods with us, but most often he works with us in a similar way from one year to another. Through experience, we see how he has answered our prayers and led us in past situations. This will help us recognize his "voice" when he speaks to us in the present. Experience comes through time, submission and meditation. The Spirit helps the humble, not the self-exalting.

We can gain even more wisdom by drawing on the experience of other Christians. The Spirit does not isolate us, but puts us into a church, into a community of other believers. He distributes his gifts so that we stay together, work together and benefit from one another's strengths (1 Corinthians 12:7). In the same way, we can help one another hear the Holy Spirit because we each have different experiences of how God works in our lives.

When a message from God comes to one person, other people are to consider it carefully (1 Corinthians 14:29). They are to consider, for one thing, whether it is really a word from the Lord. The Spirit can speak through the community as well as through certain individuals—the Jerusalem conference is a good example of learned from their the Gentiles, saw experiences agreed (Acts 15:15), and discussion heard Spirit (verse 28). The Holy Spirit people through worship songs, in small group discussions, in a whispered word of encouragement, in a silent smile, a picture or a magazine article. There are many ways we can learn from others, to receive godly guidance from others. But this is for each person to discern. Rarely does the Spirit tell one person to give orders to another.



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Sermons are a common means of spiritual speech. Those who speak should strive to speak the words of God (1 Peter 4:11), so those who speak in church should strive to listen to God as they prepare the sermons, and those who hear the sermons should likewise listen for the words of the Lord. We need to let our worship services be times of listening, of thinking, of communing with God so that we are letting him change us to be more like Christ. Let us draw near to him, and he will change us.

Circumstances are another experiential means of "testing the spirits." We may have an open door, or all the doors may be closed. Barricades may test our convictions, or they may be signals that we need to ask whether we have correctly understood the directions. They force us to think again, to seek God again, to check with Scripture, and to check with others who have spiritual maturity.

Responding to the Holy Spirit

If we want to hear, we need to listen. But if we want to hear in the biblical sense, we also need to obey. If we hear his voice, if we believe that God is telling us to do something, then we need to respond. We need to do what he has gifted us to do. We are to submit to God, for what he says is for our own good. We bring him honour, and we bring ourselves blessings, by doing his will. It begins with listening. Can you hear the Holy Spirit? It is something worth thinking about.

Joseph Tkach

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The Power of Intent

By Randal Dick

This article is intended as follow-on from my earlier article titled, "Gossiping the Gospel." I have to admit that I am feeling the pressure because of the unusually large number who responded to that article. The content of those responses indicates that there is a great deal of interest and quite an investment of energy in seeking to understand how to respond to Christ's command that we are part of his Great Commission.

What is my next step?

Many of you also made it clear that you are holding me to my statement that I would write more on this topic. As a result I have spent a great deal of time and energy pondering an answer to the question implied in most of the responses: "What is the next step?"

The answer that seemed to emerge was once again amazingly simple: become intentional about walking with Christ. The key word here is *intentional*. This next step is essential for most of us. It can also make a tremendous difference in the life of the individual and the fellowship.

A long-time friend and elder in the church put it well when he said that so much of the problem that people were facing in his congregation revolved around the fact that for more than two decades we were conditioned to be reactive, if not passive, to the gospel needs and opportunities in our immediate surroundings.

Now, he said, we understand the need to take responsibility for sharing the gospel personally. But he concluded that it is a real struggle for a lot of members to make that transformation from being reactive to being a proactive part of the gospel of Christ—living with the knowledge that we were called to live our lives for them (the lost) not just for ourselves.

Why are you saying that intent is so important?

It's really simple when you think about it: God is an intentional being. You can see it in Genesis 1, where the God of creation moved across the face of the waters of a confused planet and with great intent restored it to a state of beauty. Or, you can look at John 1, where God intentionally came to earth and lived an intentional life in the flesh in order to be the Saviour of the human race.

God is not only a God of intent, he has the power to make whatever he intends become reality. The Great Commission is a statement of intent as well. Jesus is saying that because the power to make intent become reality has been given to him, he wants us, when we go into all the world, to make disciples.

We are also intentional beings. That is one of the great gifts God has given us when he made us in his image. But unlike God, we do not have the power to always make our intention become perfect reality. Sometimes we don't even manage to make our intention reality at all, and sometimes we get a reality that we didn't intend.

Why intent must be the next step

Study Supplement No. 8

The Great Commission is of essential importance. But the Great Commission is not a mantra, nor is it a command that is independent of the other statements that surround it.

Edmund Gibbs, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, observed that in order to understand Matthew 28:18-20, one must see it in the context of Matthew 4:19, where Jesus says to those who would be disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

A Christian's primary intent should be to wholeheartedly participate with Jesus and allow him to lead us on that journey. That journey of following him is led, guided and guarded by Jesus personally.

He knows the path and the destination. He chooses the pleasant meadows of the good times and the narrow confines of our trials and sorrows. This is a journey we will never finish in this life. When we draw our last breath, it will be on the road, so to speak. Most importantly for us, this is intended to be a journey of transformation.

It is essential to be clear on this point, because it forms the foundation of all that follows. Jesus causes a powerful transformation to happen within us as we intentionally participate and wholeheartedly submit to Christ's authority in our lives. As we are transformed we become attractive to the lost who are seeking to understand the purpose of life. I cannot emphasize enough that this is what makes the difference between being part of Christ carrying out his will on this earth vs. trying to do evangelism and asking God to bless the endeavour.

Where the power of intent enters the picture Christ desires to shape our future, our reality and who we are. That is what the "follow me" is all about. I can't make my intent reality, but I do have the God-given ability (and responsibility) to be intentional in my desire to follow him. This is an essential response to Jesus' command to "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." In so doing, we open ourselves up to Christ and allow him to make us an effective part of his will on this earth.

What would some of the transforming effects be when we are intentional about being part of Christ's journey as opposed to asking him to be the guide of our journey? The semantics are small; the difference in life is huge.

We would become much more aware of the existence of unsaved people around us. We tend to block out the clutter of other people's lives, especially those for whom we feel that we have no responsibility. Being intentional about following Jesus on a daily journey automatically nudges us into a priestly mentality, because that is who Jesus is.

It is interesting to note that Christ inspired Peter to write that we, the members of the Body of Christ, are part of a royal priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifices in the name of Jesus the High Priest (1 Peter 2:9). What are those spiritual sacrifices, in practical 21st-century terms that Christ desires that we offer? The answers to that question should shape who we are and what we do, both personally and collectively.

We would be growing spiritually. Being intentional about journeying with Christ would probably cause one to begin talking to God about helping him or her to overcome some of the long-standing failings, be they commission or omission, which cause us to miss the mark. This is quite different from the legalistic approach to overcoming where one is motivated by fear of not being in the kingdom or a desire for a greater reward.

This desire to have our character formed in Christ is driven by the realization that it is Christ in us who makes us attractive to the lost, and every sin that remains resident in us causes people to see Satan's way in action instead of the transforming power of the love of God at work in us.

We would be more serious about knowing what we believe and being able to give a cogent explanation of those beliefs.

Being intentional about journeying with Christ tends to stimulate one to also be intentional about having an effective response to a lost person who needs and desires to know that there is a God, and to know how they might connect with him. Why would we leave such an important thing to accident?

Think about the words of Isaiah that Christ adopted as a primary theme of his ministry to humankind, "Comfort ye my people." "Tell them that their iniquities are pardoned." "That their warfare is ended." And "make straight a highway to our God."

Should we not invest some intentional effort at being able to assess the felt need of a person and being able to articulate that part of the gospel that speaks to their immediate need, thereby encouraging them to take yet a step toward redemption? Is not a highway a long series of steps that has been cleared of obstacles and passage made as simple as possible? What is the practical application of making a highway to our God (for the lost)? What part do we play, and what constitutes, in real terms, making a highway for them? Being intentional about being on Christ's journey would lead us to change the way we allocate our time. We might begin to focus more time and energy on people instead of things. We would also tend to focus more on the relationships that we either have, or can cultivate with people who do not have a saving relationship with Jesus. The focus of that time would be outgoing—being there for them, serving them in some small or great way, one time or ongoing.

I hope it becomes clear that by being intentional about yielding to Jesus' command to engage in a lifetime journey of following him, we put ourselves in the best position to be effective in his Great Commission. This is the power of intent.

Next segment—it gets even better!

So far we've talked about the powerful spiritual dynamic that is put into motion when we are intentional about making our walk with Christ a real part of our daily thought and action. We've seen what a transforming effect it has on our personal life. But that is only the beginning. The power of intent goes way beyond our own life. By being intentional in our walk with Christ, we become a part of what he is doing on a much larger scale. We are often not even aware of its scope until it has passed by and borne incredible fruit.

In the next instalment I'll give you a couple of exciting examples from the lives of our brethren in the early church, how a small, insignificant group of outcasts rocked an empire. They didn't know that was what they were doing. They were just being intentional about following Christ. But by being intentional about their walk with Christ, they put themselves in a position to be a part of something big.

Randal Dick

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Ordinary people... CHANGE THE WORLD

by Randal Dick

This is part three of a trilogy including Gossiping the Gospel and The Power of Intent

When we pray and ask God to let his will be done in our lives, how much do we mean it? We try to avoid putting our agenda before God's will, but I suggest that the bigger problem is that we often don't take God seriously enough in his statements about how he will use us to his glory and honour.

Study Supplement No. 8

God desires to take our daily life and spend it in a way that yields results we could not produce or predict. The net result will be so much greater than anything we could "do for the Lord"—and the impact can be magnified even further when we allow God to work through us as a community of believers.

To illustrate this point, I cite the following two powerful examples. The people involved didn't perceive any particular dramatic value to what they were doing. Yet Christ used them to help bring the Roman Empire face to face with Jesus Christ.

Women

When the first house church believers followed Christ's example in their communities, something started small, but soon grew large. As a direct result of their daily walk of obedience, the early church became attractive to women. In fact, the rate of conversion of women from paganism to Christianity became such a problem to the pagans that Emperor Julian issued a written order to Pope Damasus I banning Christian missionaries from calling at the homes of pagan women.

In order to appreciate just how the simple daily walk of the individual Christian was used by Christ to create this history shaping dynamic, we need to contrast the Christian community with that of the pagan.

Gendercide

New converts who undertook to follow Jesus would have stopped practicing abortion and infanticide. Because of the need for a large male population for war and food production, female infanticide was widely practiced in the time of the early church. It would have been a part of most family's circumstances.

A study of the Delphi inscription enabled historians to reconstruct about 600 families. Only six families had raised more than one daughter. We would call that gendercide today. Abortion was also widely practiced in Greco-Roman society. When Christians obeyed God, it became visibly evident to the pagan community around them—it made a difference.

This simple act of obedience made the Christian way of life much more attractive to Greco-Roman women, and in a fairly short time the Christian church's dominant population was women, while the pagan religion was primarily populated by men.

Christ made them 'fishers of men'

These women journeyed with Christ; their lives began to take on the character of their Lord. They were transformed into something desirable, that men could not find anywhere else. It's not that there were no virtuous pagan women, it's just that proportionately there were so many virtuous Christian women that any man looking for a virtuous woman would tend to be drawn to the Christian community.

Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7 were primarily intended to guide a phenomenon that was happening with increasing frequency. Pagan men were coming to the church to find wives with rapidly increasing frequency.

Quality of life

Over time, Christian women also came to enjoy a significantly better quality of life than did many pagan women of Greco-Roman society. This is where the Christian community, all journeying together in response to Christ, made a huge difference:

1. The Christian community rejected the all-pervasive double standard that expected women to be chaste but allowed men extensive sexual license. This changed the whole pattern of life for the community and

everyone whom they touched. And it extended to the subsequent generations. This exponentially increased the impact of that simple obedience.

2. Christians also reflected God's love for widows. Pagan widows were often forced to remarry against their will. They often became the property of the new husband and lost all inheritance and personal control of their assets. They could be put away and left with nothing. Not so with Christians. The Christian community would help sustain Christian widows without means.

3. Christian women were able to marry at an older age. That may not seem important until one realizes that in the Greco-Roman world, girls were often forced into pre-pubertal marriage. Some historians estimate that nearly 50 percent of pagan females were living in a state of consummated marriage before the age of 14. Christian women had it much better because of the intentional walk of the community on a journey with Jesus.

4. Leadership roles were available to Christian women—they were ordained deacons right along with the men. Origen and others commented on the women who were deservedly part of the diaconate. The term *deaconess* is a modern construct and does not reflect the original, where a deacon was a deacon, male or female.

Plagues

Two serious plagues swept the Roman Empire. The first ravaged the continent between A.D. 165 and about A.D. 180, the second about 100 years later. During its 15-year duration, the first plague took the lives of between one fourth and one third of the population of the empire. It even claimed the life of Emperor Marcus Aurelius. (His death was portrayed at the beginning of the movie *The Gladiator*.)

Christians were affected by the plagues along with their pagan neighbours. But unlike the pagans, most Christians were following Jesus and were emulating him in the way they lived—and in some cases the way they died. Jesus used the fact that his people followed him to rock the empire.

Imagine yourself caught in the plague. The stench of death surrounds you. Caravans of carts work their way through the streets and out of the city carrying diseased bodies to a communal dumping ground where they are either buried or burned. People all around you are dropping like flies. Who will be next to die? In the midst of circumstances like these, people ask searching questions about life, death and God. Pagans had no one to turn to. Their priests did not have answers. Their gods were of no help. Pagan gods were there to be appeased so they would not cause harm. But the pagan gods did not offer to have a loving relationship with the pagan people. Only Jesus did. The pagan gods offered no eternal life—except in the dark underworld.

So there was a hope and peace in Christians that was nurtured by the Holy Spirit. There was an attitude of outgoing love even in the sore trial they faced.

Around A.D. 260 Dionysius wrote: "Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty; never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbours and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and caring for others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom."

Study Supplement No. 8

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Large numbers of pagans fled to get away from the plague including rulers, priests and physicians, having no hope or anchor for their souls. They left their sick behind, alone, without care or the basic necessities of life. The Christians, as a whole, tended to remain and care for their loved ones, and for each other. In many cases the love of God in them stretched far enough to also enter the deserted houses of the pagans and care for those sick as well.

This individual act, resulting from asking themselves what Jesus would do in the same situation, had a profound impact. Here are some of the ways they made such a difference: The Christian example was in such stark contrast to the pagan example that large numbers of those who survived the plague

were drawn to look at the Christians around them with open hearts. Their own belief system had them down, but their Christian neighbours seemed to know a better way. Many were brought to Christ.

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Pure religion ... undefiled

Epidemiologists estimate that basic

health care, such as providing adequate water and warmth, can result in as much as a 30 percent higher survival rate. Hence there were many more Christian survivors than pagan survivors. This by itself was enough to change the ratio of pagans to Christians substantially. Also, pagans who were cared for by Christians also enjoyed a higher survival rate. These survivors then would tend to have loving relationships with Christians in place of the suspicions of the past. Conversion rates soared.

In fact, this change of the status quo had such a dramatic impact that we find the Emperor Julian writing to his chief priest of Galatia, complaining that they needed to equal the virtues of Christians.

In a letter to another priest Julian wrote, "I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence." And he also wrote, "The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us." Poor Julian, like many today, could only see things in marketing terms. He had no idea that he and his system were being confronted by Jesus himself through the collective lives of those who heeded the call to "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

Key lessons I have learned from researching and writing this trilogy:

- I recognize that Jesus wants me, not just my efforts on his behalf. His call to me is to be my ____ (he will fill in the blank, and the result will glorify the Father).
- My effectiveness starts and ends with my intentional submission of my ordinary daily life to him—each day is a new step on a lifelong journey with Christ.
- Being an ordinary person, living an ordinary life in Christ, allows him to spend me in such a way that his kingdom benefits in ways I could not even imagine, let alone engineer.

Note: Because this is a journalistic article, I did not cite every quote or source. The main source for the statistics and quotes is Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity* (1997 HarperCollins). Dr. Stark in turn cites the specific sources for the studies as well as the references from ancient manuscripts.

Bible Study

by Michael Morrison

What child is this? A study of Luke 2:22 to 52

Luke reports two events between Jesus' birth and the beginning of his ministry. These are not reported out of idle curiosity, however—both events point forward to his importance in God's plan of salvation. Remarkable prophecies were spoken when Jesus was presented to the Lord, and Jesus himself alluded to a special role when he was coming of age.

Presented to God

The Law of Moses required every firstborn son to be redeemed and dedicated to God, since God had spared all the firstborn sons of Israel in the 10th plague on Egypt (Ex. 13:11-16). The Law further specified that, for a son, the mother should wait 40 days and then bring a burnt offering and a sin offering to the sanctuary. She was to bring a lamb and a bird, or if she could not afford a lamb, two birds (Lev. 12:1-8).

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary were obedient to the Law of Moses: "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord'), 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' " (vv. 22-24).

Apparently the family could not afford a lamb. It is also interesting that Luke speaks of "their" purification, although the Law spoke only of the purification of the mother. It is ironic that the Law required redemption for the Redeemer, and a sin offering to purify a divinely caused conception.

It was at this trip to the temple that some significant prophecies were given:

Study Supplement No. 8

"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 upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts" (vv. 25-27).

This godly man earnestly wanted God to rescue Israel, and the Holy Spirit spoke to him (as he had spoken to the Old Testament prophets) and caused him to come to the temple at the right time.

When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple courts for the dedication and purification ritual, Simeon intervened: "Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' " (vv. 28-32).

The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that this child was the answer to his hopes and faith; although the salvation itself had not been completed, it was sure. God had kept his promise to Simeon. His lifelong desire was coming to pass, and he felt his life was complete. He had seen the answer, and he knew that this child would be the salvation not only of Israel but all the Gentiles, too. He was God's Anointed One, who would be the "light to the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6).

Joseph and Mary "marvelled at what was said about him" (v. 33). Could it be that Joseph and Mary didn't quite believe that this miraculous child would be the Saviour of all peoples? Or more likely, Luke tells us this for our benefit, so that we think more deeply about the significance of what was said. We should also marvel at these auspicious words.

After Simeon had blessed Jesus, he also blessed Joseph and Mary. But the salvation of Israel would not be a bed of roses—Simeon also spoke of troubles to come: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (vv. 34-35).

The Saviour of Israel would cause some to rise in God's favour, but would also cause some to fall, because some people would speak against him. They would not like the salvation that he brought, and their thoughts would be exposed as ungodly. They would reject his brand of salvation, thinking that they did not need it. And Mary herself would suffer as a result. We are not yet told how—Luke keeps us in suspense.

The prophetess

Luke also tells us about Anna, who was known to be a prophetess. He does not quote her words, but nevertheless includes her involvement:

"There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 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" (vv. 36-38).

Anna, an elderly model of piety, was apparently inspired to understand that this baby boy was the Saviour who would redeem the people of God, and she spread the good news about him. More and more people were learning that the time of salvation has come.

Luke then wraps up this part of the story with some general comments: "When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (vv. 39-40). Luke says nothing about the family's trip to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23). He simply brings Jesus to Nazareth, his childhood home. There he grew in wisdom, and God was with him.

Jesus in the temple

Jesus' parents, as Law-abiding Jews, went to Jerusalem every year for the Passover (v. 41). When Jesus was 12 (13 was considered the age of spiritual maturity), they went as usual to the Passover festival.

"After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it" (v. 43). (They must have had other children to take care of.) They simply assumed he was in the travelling party, which might have included a large number of friends, neighbours and other children.

"Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day." But probably when he did not join the family at night, "they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him" (vv. 44-45).

After a day travelling north, and one travelling south and a day of searching, "they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers" (vv. 46-47). Later, people would not merely be amazed at Jesus—they would be angry. But at this point, Jesus was simply amazing. Even his questions showed an unusual depth of understanding for someone his age.

But when his parents finally found him, "they were astonished. His mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you' " (v. 48). Mary felt that Jesus had done something wrong. They had trusted him to join the group travelling back to Galilee, but he hadn't.

Perhaps it was an innocent mix-up. Jesus may have tried to find his parents, too, but eventually had to go back to a location where they could find him, and while waiting, he used his time well. We do not know, but Jesus thought they should have known to look for him in the temple. Where he slept, we do not know.

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (v. 49). It was necessary, Jesus said, that he would be doing the work of God. Jesus was referring to his heavenly Father and his

Study Supplement No. 8

divine mission, "but they did not understand what he was saying to them" (v. 50). They knew their child was the Messiah, that he had a special mission, but they did not know the details of how he would do his work. There was a bit of mystery to this child—but Jesus knew what he had to do.

His time had not yet come, so "he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men" (vv. 51-52).

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. Joseph and Mary set a good example of obedience (vv. 22-24). Although the law they obeyed is

- obsolete, their attitude is still exemplary. Am I as dedicated to God as they were?
2. How well do I respect the spiritual service of elderly saints?
 3. Have I experienced pain as well as salvation from Jesus Christ? (v. 35)
 4. Do I have a sense of mission like Jesus did? (v. 49) What am I dedicated to?
 5. Do I grow in favour with God and with other people? (v. 52) Is it sometimes necessary to have less favour?

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