

The Weight of Waiting
John Kitchen

Long gray wisps of hair extended from between his clinched fingers as his balled up hands pressed hard against his forehead. Upon his knees his body rocked in rhythmic motion as his heart wrestled with God. His eyes, tight shut in earnest pursuit of an unseen God, squeezed salty droplets from their corners that went lost in his long white beard.

“How long, O Lord! How long!”

The lean silhouette of masculine agedness had been earned through long bouts of fasting. The sinewy strength of his soul was the product of extended seasons of earnest prayer.

“Lord, please! How long? When will I see Him? You promised me. It was your own word! You, I need not remind you, cannot lie.”

His rocking slowed as he fell into outward silence. But the inward pleading continued until his kneeling form came to a frozen, statuesque stillness.

“Lord! O Lord ... when?”

This had been Simeon’s life ever since in a flash of inward, personal revelation God had assured him that he would not leave this earth without seeing Messiah.

Messiah. The anointed one. The King. The Commander. The Conquerer. The Liberator. The Christ.

He, Simeon, would live to see Him! To witness His breaking forth upon the stage of history!

But – and how many times had he asked it by now? – when!

Well advanced in age and with no peers left around him, Simeon had repeated the question “How long?” more times that he could imagine and had uttered the word “when” more than he cared to think. The weight of the waiting was, well, killing him. Except that he couldn’t

die until the waiting was over, which only made the sense of dying lay heavier upon his soul.

Outside of town a young couple peeled off the road from Bethlehem and turned toward Jerusalem. As they walked they bore a weight, a happy weight—a child in their arms. Their child was no burden, but the weight of all that swirled around him did still weigh heavily upon them. He was just shy of six weeks old. Forty days ago the burden of their anticipation slid off their hearts as they welcomed their son into the world. But there had certainly been no time for boredom since then, between angel visitations and an impromptu worship service with shepherds. And, no, the leering eyes of the self-righteous still hadn't entirely lifted off of them. But at least he was here now. His presence somehow lightened the load that had been bearing down upon their souls all these long months.

Emerging from one of Jerusalem's narrow, cobblestone streets the couple with child in arms began climbing toward the massive, looming edifice of the Temple. The man, Joseph, paused at the sight of one of the vendors who had set up shop along this route to the place of worship. With a grimace he fished a few small coins from his bag. They'd come to him the hard way—with hammer blows and sawdust. As a carpenter he eked out a living for himself and his tiny family. There would be no lamb for his bride's ceremonial cleansing. The Law's provision of a poor man's offering would have to do. "Two of the turtledoves, please," he asked the seller, with a hint of embarrassment in his tone. He couldn't bring himself to look Mary, his wife, in the eye during the transaction.

Though no noise entered his room and nothing changed about him, Simeon was suddenly roused from the depths of his concentrated prayer. Abruptly he rose, grabbed his outer tunic and

exited to make his way onto the street. His prior stillness was now displaced by his present rush. With long, loping strides he ran through the winding alleyways like a man a fourth his age. Driven on by an inward impulse that he didn't quite understand but felt compelled to obey, he rushed toward the Temple. Inwardly he presumed the Lord simply wanted him to change the location of his praying. Rounding one more corner the Temple came into view. With his goal in sight he slowed his pace to catch his breath.

Just down the street the small family came upon another kiosk. This time Joseph rummaged in his bag for more and larger coins. "A lamb, please," he asked this seller. "It is for the redemption of my firstborn son," he proudly answered. This time he shot a glance of joy mingled with pride toward his wife. They both smiled as he took the lamb up in his arms and gathered up the small cage that contained the turtledoves.

They trudged on toward the Temple, but now with more life in their steps. Soon they would dedicate their son to the Lord—their firstborn would now be set apart and holy to the Lord.

Joseph was relieved to mount the last step leading upward to the Temple courts, as was Mary with the babe in her arms. Feeling a bit winded they maneuvered through the people filling the Court of the Gentiles. Their eyes scanned the premises, seeking just where they needed to go to present their offerings and receive Mary's cleansing and their child's redemption.

Simeon had by now found a quiet place to the side where he could pray—with his eyes open, of course. If praying with his eyes shut was the need of the moment he could have done that just as well in his room. No, he had a clear sense that the Lord led him to the Temple to

show him something, or someone.

He scanned the people as they milled about and came and went through these outer courts of the Temple. They all, for the most part, looked alike. He'd been to the Temple a thousand times; he saw nothing out of the ordinary today. "Lord," he prayed, "why did you send me here so abruptly? What am I to hear or see or do here right now?"

Then, a flash of inward knowing arose within him. It was a knowing so certain that, while one cannot explain it, one need not justify it—he simply knew. There they were. There *he* was! Simeon, even if under interrogation, could not have explained how he knew, he only knew that he knew. This was him, the one, the one worth all waiting.

Joseph and Mary, their little lamb and three sacrificial animals were doing their best to make their way through the flow of people coming and going through the courts. Joseph nearly lost the lamb from his arms once when someone wasn't watching where they were going and then someone bumped the tiny cage so hard he thought the turtledoves would be fluttering away when he got his head turned around. But all remained together and they moved forward in anticipation and devotion.

Simeon, for his part, was initiating his own jostling as he plowed through the crowd like a man on a mission, which, I guess, you could say he was. He kept his eyes fixed upon the couple and their child as he mindlessly offered, "Pardon me!" "Excuse me!" "I'm sorry" to each person he knocked off their course.

Then, not fast enough but quicker than he was ready for, he stood before them—

beaming! “Hello!” he blurted abruptly.

“Hello,” Joseph responded hesitantly as Mary looked up to read his face.

“Um, I’m sorry,” Simeon offered. “I, um, I . . . could I hold your baby?” he said awkwardly.

“Excuse me?” Joseph replied in surprise, but too slowly. For the old man had already snatched the child from his mother’s arms before Joseph could empty his of the sacrificial animals. Mary shot a look of fear toward her husband.

“Oh! Oh! It’s *you!*” the aged one exclaimed with a face that shone with a joy pent up so long that its release seemed it would burn his face.

The look now exchanged between mother and father was one less of fear than of confusion. “Who are you?” Joseph asked.

“Oh! Oh! It is *you!*” the old man said again, ignoring Joseph’s inquiry.

Joseph started to protest as he moved to hand off the animals to his wife, but as he opened his mouth he heard the old man break into what seemed to be a prayer.

“At last, Lord! Now you can dismiss your servant in peace, just like you promised! With my own two eyes I have beheld your salvation—a salvation made ready for all people—a light to shine truth upon all the peoples of the earth and to bring glory to your people Israel.”

With that the old man squeezed the child to his chest, leaned his head back toward heaven and said as much with his countenance as he had with his voice. *Ecstasy!* That’s the word that came to Mary’s mind as she watched this elderly stranger adore her son. Both father and mother sensed they had been caught up in a holy moment, though the particular reason for its holiness and happiness was not yet clear to them. Thus they paused—sensing no danger to their child—and watched in wonder.

The crowds continued to bustle past them on every side, but there in the midst of the Temple courts they'd been enveloped in a bubble of worship, spotlighted in a beam of heavenly sunshine. As if a divine finger had reached out and gently pressed a pause button and invited them to see and think and feel at a depth and in a dimension that could only be called other-worldly.

The old man then lowered his head and opened his eyes, fixing them upon Mary and Joseph with an intensity that might have felt intimidating if not for the love that infused it. Then he spoke. His words were simple enough, but they seemed freighted with an authority that arose from somewhere beyond himself. The words fell upon the parents like some odd mixture of a trumpet blast and a whispered secret.

“Look! See! Observe!” the white haired prophet began. “This child,” and with that he slightly elevated the child above their heads in his loving, extended arms. “This child is among us by God’s own hand! He is present among us to fulfill a divine destiny.”

His words stirred within both mother and father a recollection of the strange events that had come upon them from the time of Mary’s conception. Angel visitations. Elizabeth’s prophecy. Shepherd’s worship.

The old prophet continued, “God has set him among us to bring both the hope of everlasting life and the reality of eternal judgment. On him the eternal destiny of every human being rests.”

Even with all the events that had already transpired in connection with his son, Joseph thought to himself, *That seems a pretty heavy calling to lay on a babe still suckling his mother’s breast.*

But the old man was not yet done. “This boy will become a man who will draw a line in

the sand of humanity, dividing people one from another. All must decide: am I with him or am I against him.”

Joseph gulped as Mary’s brow furrowed in bewildered pain.

Then, looking deeply into Mary’s eyes, the old man prophesied, “A sword will pierce through your own soul also. This son of your love will become the pain of your heart.”

Her eyes welled with tears. *What is he talking about?*, she screamed within her mind. *How could he who has brought me such joy ever render me that much pain?*

Then the aged prophet closed his oracle. “This boy is a light, from God! He is a light that will expose the reality of all people’s hearts. For this some will love him. For this some will hate him.”

With that the aged one turned his eyes back onto the child. The babe reached out his tiny hand and laid hold on the old man’s downy white beard, playfully grabbing a handful of the whiskers and pulling him near. Simeon hugged the child close once more then with great care delivered him back into his mother’s arms.

Jaws slack and still speechless, Mary and Joseph watched as this Gandalf-looking creature withdrew into the crowds, melding into the mass of humanity, soon out of their sight. Neither of them was sure just how long they stood there in silence, mentally fidgeting to piece together all the events that seemed to cluster around their boy. Their hearts sought a coherent picture of what it all could mean. As the eyes of their hearts strained to make out that picture, the weight of waiting settled even more heavily upon them. Eventually Joseph regathered the turtledoves and tracked down the lamb. Mary joined his side with Jesus in arms. They moved forward to seal in worship the things that had now been freighted upon their hearts and to cast their burden upon the Lord, waiting for the outworking of His great plan for their son.

Somewhere down one of Jerusalem's winding back alleys an tall, lean old man found his door, ascended the stairs he'd climbed an untold number of times, and entered the sanctuary of his tiny room. Once again he knelt. He sighed deeply, contentedly. The weight of his long-suffered waiting dropped from his soul in a rapturous exchange of prayer. And with a smile spread across his face Simeon fell forward to prostrate himself before God as he had so many times before. Only this time, before his face hit the floor, his now lightened spirit was gone ... being found immediately in the presence of the Lord he had sought so earnestly throughout his earthly life.

Now for you, my listening friend. There is a weight upon your own soul, is there not? What is to be done about it?

It is the weight of *light*. Jesus causes you to see as you've never seen before. God. Yourself. Your sin. And what He causes you to see sets like a weight upon your soul.

It is the weight of *promise*. Is Jesus who He declared Himself to be? Did Jesus, upon the cross, really take upon Himself the weight of your sin? Did He really, through His resurrection, triumph over all that burdens you?

It is the weight of *decision*. Am I for Jesus? Or am I not?

I leave you this Christmas with the glorious weight of Jesus upon your heart and with my prayer that you'll *admit* to what He shows you, *rest* in what He's promised you, and *trust* for Him unto eternal life.

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