



A BIBLE STUDY ON MARTIN LUTHER (LAST DAYS)



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Jesus

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*An Outlaw and International Hero Who Commended Himself
and the Church of the Reformation to Christ's Mercy*

“In Peace and Joy I Now Depart”

(TLH 137; LW 185; LSB 938) (Luke 2:29–32; Is. 42:6–7; 49:6, 52:10)

“It is wondrous to say that I should believe and cling to the fact that I am in God’s hands — even if I am held firmly in the devil’s jaws and feel death and sins.” — Martin Chemnitz (Church Postils, Sermon on the Presentation of Christ)

As Simeon commended himself to the Lord’s care after holding the long-awaited Messiah child in his arms, so Martin Luther commended himself to Christ’s mercy and grace. Note that in the English Standard Version of the Bible, this passage is formatted as (sung) poetry. These words are commonly referred to as “the Song of Simeon.” The Luther hymn below first appeared in 1524 under the title “Simeon’s Song of Praise,” along with a reference to Luke 2:29–32. Under its Latin title, the “Nunc Dimittis” continues to be sung after the reception of the Lord’s Supper.

In his last days, Luther was seen as an outlaw, the administrator of a new church body and an international hero. But with his health failing and increased infighting among those who saw themselves as reformers of the Christian Church, Luther knew that after his death even more difficulties would threaten those who had faithfully received the re-discovered Gospel. Despite the fact that he was relatively safe under the protection of his Saxon prince, Luther in his later years had less and less patience for all who attacked, compromised or ignored the Christ and Gospel of Holy Scripture. Luther knew his health was failing. He drew up his “last theological will and testament” — the Smalcald Articles — in 1537. Luther died nine years later in Eisleben, the same town he was born and baptized in, after commending himself to the mercy of Christ.

This Luther hymn has been used for centuries on the Festival of the Presentation (Feb. 2). It has also been included in Christian funeral services.

STANZA ONE

*In peace and joy I now depart / Since God so wills it. /
Serene and confident my heart; / Stillness fills it. / For the
Lord has promised me / That death is but a slumber.*

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word” (LUKE 2:29). In this Luther hymn, the reason for Simeon’s — and all Christians’ peace and joy — is held to the end of the stanza: the Lord’s promise that for those baptized into Christ, death is only a blessed sleep. This is the confidence and strength of all who put their trust in Christ and His Word.

1. Simeon sings of the confident reality that his freedom from sin and death rests with the long-awaited Messiah he now holds in his arms. His faith is in the now-fulfilled prophecies of the inspired prophets of long ago. Reflect on Simeon’s joy of being set free in light of Is. 42:6–7.

2. Simeon left the temple with a joyful heart at rest. Unlike Simeon, Christians in the 16th century and Christians today have not been given the opportunity to hold the Christ Child in their arms. Nevertheless, seeing the Messiah in faith, all the redeemed can follow Simeon in singing the phrase “according to your word.” How do believers today stake everything on God’s Word? In what way is the Holy Bible Christ’s cradle?

STANZA TWO

*Christ Jesus brought this gift to me, / My faithful Savior, /
Whom You have made my eyes to see / By Your favor. /
Now I know He is my life, / My friend when I am dying.*

“For my eyes have seen your salvation” (LUKE 2:30). In his 1537 festival sermon, Luther proclaims: “Simeon ... sings very clearly: ‘Mine eyes have seen Your salvation, that You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles,’ and so on. In other words, he is saying, I know of no other Savior and Light than this one, whom I am now holding in my arms and beholding with my own eyes. From this it follows, as said, that everything that is not Christ is darkness, blindness, death and the devil before God, even though it be temporal government and the rightful justice of the emperor. For such things carry no weight before God but belong down here in the cow shed, that is, in

this perishable, transitory life. But this child, of whom Simeon is singing here, is the world's only Savior and Light, who sheds light on us and makes us righteous and holy before God" (*The Day of Mary's Purification* in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*. Eugene F.A. Klug, ed. Volume 7, Page 282. Copyright © 2000 by Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Used by permission).

3. In this stanza, Jesus is presented as our faithful Savior and friend in death — our righteousness and holiness. How does Jesus win and bestow the gift of eternal peace to those who will receive it in faith? How does the believer see Christ carry out His saving work at the baptismal font and the altar?

4. For Lutheran Christians, the Song of Simeon is often sung after receiving the Lord's Supper. Why did other Protestant church bodies remove the "Nunc Dimittis" from the Communion liturgy? Why do Lutherans continue to sing Simeon's Song as they depart from the Communion rail?

STANZA THREE

You sent the people of the earth / Their great salvation; / Your invitation summons forth / Ev'ry nation / By Your holy, precious Word, / In ev'ry place resounding.

"That you have prepared in the presence of all peoples" (LUKE 2:31). **The promised Messiah was heaven's saving gift to the entire human race. He was the promised Word made human flesh — like us in every way, yet without sin** (HEB. 4:15).

5. Reflect on the enormity of Jesus' mission to redeem in light of the words of Is. 49:6 and the Gospel "nevertheless" of John 1:12.

6. Jesus rejoices in the gracious will of His heavenly Father when He prays, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (LUKE 10:21). Then Jesus addresses His own: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (LUKE 10:23–24). How did Simeon not only see salvation in the flesh but hear of his and the world's redemption? What events in Luther's life were used by Christ to reveal the Gospel invitation to Luther's despairing eyes and ears?

STANZA FOUR

Christ is the hope and saving light / Of those in blindness; / He guides and comforts those in night / By His kindness. / For Your people Israel / In Him find joy and glory.

"A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (LUKE 2:32). **Luther concludes his festival sermon (1537) with these words: "This is the song that Simeon has sung to us today. ... 'Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace,' he says, and this means: Now I will depart with my heart filled with joy; I see no death — I cannot even call it a death but a peaceful journey. He does not say, Now I wish to die; but now I wish to depart in peace. This was a song not just in his mouth, on his tongue, on paper, but in his heart! May our dear God and Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ, His Son, grant us His grace through His Holy Spirit that we may join to sing along with beloved Simeon and also depart in peace. Amen"** (*The Day of Mary's Purification* in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, Page 283).

7. The evangelist Luke does not actually tell us the age of Simeon. He could have been a young man when he held the Christ Child in his arms. Regardless of his age, Simeon lived the rest of his life with a peace that the world could never give: confidence that God had made good on His promise and sent His only Son to redeem Simeon and all people — Jew and Gentile. Reflect on why "peace" is so prominent in the liturgy. Where does it occur? What is the significance of its context?

8. Although he died in the dark of night, Luther was graciously kept in the saving light of Christ's Word as he recited the gracious promises from the Old and New Testaments. In Luther's last hours, only Christ was his "hope and saving light." It is St. Paul who reveals to us that while "salvation is from the Jews" (JOHN 4:22), it is also for the deliverance of the Gentiles. Reflect on the common way in which Christ, Stephen and Luther commended themselves to their heavenly Father at the hour of their death. How is this radically different than the unbelieving world's way of dying?