

The Eighth Day After Christmas • Luke 2:21-39

There is a poorly kept secret that is well known to parents of three or more children. It's called "The Principle of Diminishing Baby Books". It works like this. The first child has a very well documented childhood with carefully recorded baby books and lots of pictures and mementos. The second child has a half-finished baby book with piles of snapshots stuffed in the back. The third child has a baby book, but it has never been opened and the price tag is still on it. The fourth child doesn't have a baby book and is always called by three sibling names before being called by his or her own name. Fifth and more children have no unrecorded childhoods.

Jesus was the first child. Luke 2 tells about his infancy—including details, names and dates. Information about Mary and Joseph's other children is pretty sparse. We know little about Jesus' brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. We don't even know the names of his sisters. It demonstrates "The Principle of Diminishing Baby Books".

We don't know the actual date of Jesus' birth. What happened was far more important than when it happened. In fact, for the first four centuries Christians didn't celebrate the birth of Jesus. It was his death and resurrection that were the centers of celebration. It wasn't until the fifth century that the Roman Church established December 25th as the date for the "Christ mass". It was an interesting choice of dates since it was the holiday for the Roman god Sol, the god of the sun. Some Christians may have great trouble with turning a pagan holiday into the anniversary of Jesus' birth. Others will say that is typical of Christianity—always converting what is pagan into what is Christian.

Whatever was the original date of Jesus' birth, we know that eight days later his parents had him circumcised. They put on him the ancient mark of the Jewish covenant with God. While the Romans may have seen this as mutilation, the Jews saw it as marvelous. It was an intimate personal reminder that they belonged

to God at the very core of their reproductive lives. They wore the "brand" of God.

Circumcision was so important that its practice overrode the Ten Commandments' prohibition against work on the Sabbath day. If the eighth day fell on a Sabbath day, the circumcision was always done on that day anyway.

It was at this time that a boy was named—never sooner, never later. But in Jesus' case, his naming was special. His baby book says, "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived."

Our generation has gotten into naming babies before they are born because gender can be determined through ultrasound. Jesus was named before he was conceived.

His name was not at all unusual. Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name "Joshua". It is probable that his nickname may have been "Josh" when he was growing up. Whether in Greek or Hebrew or the Spanish *Jesus*, the name means "Jehovah the Savior". This very special child was named for God and salvation.

We are not told about the travels of the Joseph family over the next few weeks, but it seems they stayed in Bethlehem. They may have needed time for Mary to rest and recuperate. It was an 80 mile trek north back to their hometown of Nazareth. They showed up in Jerusalem less than a month after Jesus' circumcision and naming—and Jerusalem is only five miles from Bethlehem. It wouldn't make sense to go all the way to Nazareth and then come all the way back to Jerusalem.

They went to Jerusalem to present Jesus at the temple. The Hebrew law required a wait of 40 days after the birth of a son during which a woman could not participate in religious ceremonies. So about six weeks after the birth of Jesus they went to the temple to fulfill the rituals. This meant that Jesus was presented to the priest and consecrated to God as required in Exodus 13:2.

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It was also required that two animal sacrifices had to be made. It is the Hebrew Law in Leviticus 12:

The Lord said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over. If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait sixty-six days to be purified from her bleeding.

“ ‘When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the Lord to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.

“ ‘These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.’ ”

While there are many interesting points to be made between Jesus and these Old Testament laws, there is one we must not miss. It is that Mary and Joseph did not offer a lamb and a pigeon for sacrifice. They offered two pigeons instead. In other words, they claimed the special exemption that was given to the very poorest people in Israel. Those who couldn't afford a lamb sacrifice could catch another pigeon for sacrifice instead. Conclusion? Jesus was born into a very poor family. They had to claim the equivalent of the “welfare clause” in the laws of their religion.

Since Jesus was born into such a poor family, I assume that he grew up poor. He went without. There were shortages of money and food

and decent clothing. His home was humble. His luxuries were few if any. There is very little correlation between the way we celebrate Christmas and the way Christmas was for Jesus.

The poverty of Jesus is a powerful statement to us in our frenzied quest for prosperity. Jesus gave up his wealth for us. He left heaven for a stable. In the words of II Corinthians 8:9, “Éthough he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus was willing to sacrifice his wealth for us!

Would we do that for him? Would we be willing to give up what we have out of gratitude for Jesus? Every time we sacrificially give, we are following the example of Jesus.

From the poverty of Jesus his baby book moves on to prophecy about Jesus. There was a godly man named Simeon who lived in Jerusalem and spent most of his time at the temple. I have always assumed that he was an old man and was dying from old age, although it doesn't actually say that. It may well be that he wasn't that old but that instead he had a chronic terminal illness. Either way, he was going to die and had one last wish—that before his death he would meet the Messiah. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon realized as soon as he saw the baby Jesus that he was the one. He was the Messiah.

Simeon composed and sang a hymn of praise to God. It has since been called “The Song of Simeon” or the *Nunc Dimittis* from the first words in Latin. Since the fourth century it has been an evening song—for the ending of the day. But it really is the kind of song to be sung for the ending of a life. Here was a soon-to-die man who was at peace facing death. He sang:

“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.”

Simeon was ready to die. He was happy and at peace with God. But after his song he still had something to say. He blessed Mary and Joseph and Jesus and then he looked Mary in the eye and spoke some wonderful and strange words of prophecy about her baby. Simeon said, “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.”

At Christmas we don't usually think of Jesus as a cause to fall. But for unbelievers, Jesus truly is a stumbling block. Those who don't believe in him as Savior are uncomfortable with who Jesus is and the total demands he puts on our lives. Jesus shows us our sin and judges us for falling short of God's expectations. To those who do not believe, Jesus is bad news, not good.

By contrast, Jesus causes those who believe in him to rise. Jesus was predicted to be like a stone—a stumbling stone to some and a stepping-stone to others. I have seen this a thousand times over. Some people reject Jesus Christ and their lives repeatedly tumble downward. Others believe in him and follow him and stunning positive changes for good come into their lives.

There can be no permanent neutrality with Jesus. People are for him or against him. They follow him or go their own ways. He shows us for what we really are and all we will become. In the prediction of Simeon, even ‘the thoughts of our hearts are revealed.’”

Finally, Simeon predicts pain for Mary. He tells her, “É a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Those must have been heavy words for Mary to hear. When your baby is young you have dreams of ideals and not of pain. You expect the best and cannot imagine the worst. But Mary would live the rest of her life with the increasing realization that some would love and worship her son while others would hate and curse her son. The ultimate heartbreak would come thirty-three years later when she would be an eyewitness to his crucifixion.

Depictions throughout two thousands years have generally shown Mary with two basic expressions on her face. In the art of the Christmas birth she is seen as the young mother at peace; almost all other drawings of her show a woman with pain. In Latin she has been called *Mater Dolorosa*, Mother of Sorrows.

Christmas is about the wondrous joyous birth of Jesus. But the purpose of his birth must soon

be learned. He came to deal with the reality of human sin. He came to be our Savior. Jesus is not most about a happy birth; he is most about salvation and eternal life.

Well, one last page of Jesus' baby book. It is the page with a picture of a godly old lady named Anna. She was a prophetess. She proclaimed the word and the truth of God. It is interesting because this was usually a male role. But God chose and used Anna, as he chooses and uses us all. The baby book says that she was “very old”. The author Luke uses words that are somewhat ambiguous in the Greek language in which he wrote. They could well indicate that she was over 100 years old. If she was married around 16, the typical marrying age in Jerusalem in those days, the marriage lasted until she was 23. Then she was a widow for 84 years after her husband died. Anna could have been 107 years.

The point is that she had suffered. Most of her life was spent alone. Most widows were very poor. She knew first-hand about life's difficulties. Yet she was not bitter. Unlike some, the pain, problems and disappointments of life had not turned her sour. She was a tender, gracious, grateful and godly old lady. Anna is an example for us all that the sorrows of life can make us better and not bitter!

Whether she was 84 or 107, she wasn't finished. Her life was spent positively and productively. There was no spiritual retirement for this wonderful woman. Anna was at the temple all of the time. She lived her life around the worship of God, fasting and praying.

This is not to say that the best life is always spent at church, but it is to say that Anna valued spiritual success more than anything else. She lived and breathed God. God was not peripheral to her life. He was not assigned to the margins. He was central to everything she did.

Her reward was to see the baby Jesus person-to-person. And her first response was thanksgiving. She was keenly attuned to what God was doing and she was grateful. So she did what a prophetess is supposed to do; she proclaimed. Anna “spoke about the child to all who were

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looking.” She did what we are supposed to do when we see the Christ of Christmas—she told others!

Well, that’s about it for the baby book of Jesus. If there are more pages from his early years they have blown away in the winds of history. The next page we find skips ahead to when Jesus was 12 years old. But that’s for another time.

Now I must confess to you that I find some baby books more interesting than others. There have been times when proud parents have shown to me scores of pictures and all kinds of saved items from flowers to birth announcements and I have become a little bored. But the baby books that never bore me are the ones that tell the stories of children to whom I am related. I can look at them again and again. Every repeat of well-worn pages is fresh and exciting every time. You know what makes the difference, don’t you? It’s the difference of a relationship.

The question is: do you find Jesus boring or exciting? I guess it depends on whether or not you are related to him. If he is just another kid from history, his story can get pretty dull. If he is your Savior, Lord and Friend you never tire of seeing, learning and talking about him.

All of which is to ask: “What is your relationship to Jesus?” Does all of life center on

him?” Do you believe in him 100%? If so, tell him for the first time or tell him one more time this Christmas. For Jesus, the best birthday present you can give him is to tell him, “Jesus, I believe in you. I love you. I will follow you anywhere. I want to be with you forever.”

When Jesus is your Savior and Lord, you worship and adore him as the King of kings and Lord of lords who will rule in your life forever and ever. Hallelujah!

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