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Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord (Series A)

February 2, 2014

Text: Luke 2:22–32

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The birth of a child is cause for great celebration. A new life is safely born. The labor of childbirth is over. And a deep sense of gratitude settles in. Children are a gift of God. Mary and Joseph knew and understood these normal human emotions. There had been great rejoicing at the birth of their Son, Jesus, angels and shepherds. But as you parents know, once a child is safely born, the details of raising that beautiful gift must begin.

It doesn't seem possible, but it's been 40 days since Christmas. Our gospel reading for today from Luke 2:22–32 records the events that took place on the 40th day of our Lord's earthly life. Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus have left Bethlehem's manger and are now in Jerusalem's Temple. Jesus and Mary are taking care of some of the details of raising a Son in Israel. Specifically, they must go to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to offer the appropriate sacrifices according to the Old Testament Law of Moses. The fulfillment of the Law is the key to understanding this Biblical text.

Two separate laws are at work here in Luke chapter 2; one for Mary, Jesus' mother, and one for Jesus. Did you notice in Luke 2:22, the Bible says that "the time came for *their* purification according to the Law of Moses"? Both mother and Child had to go to the Temple for purification, to offer sacrifices.

This first law deals with Mary. According to Leviticus 12, every woman who gives birth to a male child, is to wait 40 days and then appear at the Temple to offer a blood sacrifice for her purification. (She was to wait 80 days if she had a girl.) A lamb and either a pigeon or a turtledove are to be sacrificed as an offering. Only one alternative was allowed. If the mother cannot afford a lamb, then she will provide either two turtledoves or two pigeons; one for a burnt offering the other for a sin offering. It's a startling fact that because Mary's womb issued life, others must die in the sacrifices the Law demands.

The second law deals with Jesus, Mary's firstborn Son. According to Exodus 13, the firstborn males, whether man or beast, must be consecrated to the Lord. The firstborn are holy to the Lord, they are the first-fruits of the womb. And the Law demands that the consecrated firstborn be redeemed by sacrifice; through the shedding of blood (vs. 13). And there was a very significant theological reason for the consecration of the firstborn. Let me read to you Exodus 13:14-16,

“And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.”

This law was to be a continual reminder that the Lord redeemed the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

In order for these firstborn sons to live in accordance with God's will and purpose, another must die; blood must be shed. Those cute, cuddly 40-day old Hebrew boys have blood on their hands quite literally. No matter how innocent they may appear, a sacrifice must be made on their behalf. No exceptions allowed.

Mary, the virgin mother of Christ, presents herself and her first-born Son before the Lord in His Temple 40 days after His birth. They are there to fulfill the requirements of the Law in Leviticus 12 and Exodus 13. Without the shed blood of two birds, the Virgin Mother would be in violation of the Law. She would be unclean. If Jesus is not presented before the Lord as a redeemed firstborn, the Law would stand unfulfilled. The angel Gabriel declared the fruit of her womb to be the holy Son of God. But Gabriel never gave Mary permission to ignore the Law. The sacrifices must be offered for both Mary and yes, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Law demands it.

The Bible doesn't romanticize children as we tend to do nor does it exempt them from the need of forgiveness, grace and salvation. To be sure, children are a gift of God, a reward of the womb according to Psalm 127:3 which are to be received with great joy and thanksgiving. But, it's not without reason that 8 day old Jewish boys were circumcised and newborn boys and girls were redeemed by sacrifice. Keep in mind

why the firstborn were redeemed in the first place. It was a reminder that lamb's blood had to be shed in order to protect all the firstborn (children and adult alike) from the tenth and final plague in Egypt.

But unlike so many infants brought to the Temple for redemption, Jesus goes there not for His own sake but ours. He is the infant God, the Lord of the Law. Even though He did not need sacrifices, they were offered and a marvelous thing occurred; something that should cause us to leap and shout for joy. The one Child upon whom the Law could make no demands became like one of us. He willingly placed Himself under the Law and its curse in order to redeem us who were under the Law's curse. The apostle Paul declares this in Galatians 4:4–5, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” He was made like us in every respect so that in every respect, He could make blood atonement for our sins and so bring us into the Father's heavenly family.

Think of it this way. Whatever Jesus does or was done to Him, fulfills the Law. When Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day of His life, the Law of circumcision was fulfilled. When Jesus was presented in the Temple and bought back with blood, the law of the first-born was fulfilled. These holy requirements were fulfilled, filled up with Jesus. And, if you take that all the way to Jesus' baptism, to His suffering and death on the cross, the entire Law came to its purpose when the Son of God died on the cross. It was filled up with Jesus – accomplished, finished.

We bring our children to church and the things of God in general, and the waters of holy baptism in particular, as we do today for Wyatt, not to fulfill the Law of Moses. Jesus has already done that for us, for her. Our young children (and any adults too) are brought to baptism and the things of God because Jesus calls us to Him through the saving invitation of the Gospel. Our Lord said just moments before His ascension into heaven that disciples are to be made of all nations by baptizing them with water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and by teaching them all that Jesus said (Matthew 28:19–20). The words “all nations” include the infants of all nations. These baptismal waters are filled-up with Jesus. St. Paul declares in Romans 6 that as many as are baptized are baptized into Christ's death for the express purpose that we might walk in the life of Christ's resurrection.

Animals and birds need not be sacrificed again. The Law's demand for blood was supplied by our Lord Jesus. Through Jesus' blood we have salvation. The Law's accusing voice raised against us is forever silenced. It's filled up with Jesus.

And our response to Christ's saving work performed at His birth, at 40 days old, at 33 years old is worship, faith, and love. We see it in today's reading with Simeon. Once He saw the 40-day old Savior, He worshipped, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation..." (vs. 29–30). We join in Simeon's song every Sunday after seeing the Lord's salvation given to us in the Lord's Supper. The Nunc Dimittis, sung after the Lord's Supper is received, is Simeon's Song. We, like him, depart in peace. We have seen the Lord's salvation given to us in holy body and blood for us.

Our consciences are wiped pure and clean through Jesus. The thoughts and intents of our hearts are made holy in Christ's final and complete sacrifice. The renewal of the Christian life begins, continues and ends with Jesus and what He did for you and me. The Law is fulfilled and we are free in Christ. Let us depart in peace.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.