

Simeons bucket list

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[0 : 00] Do you have a bucket list? I hope you don't feel offended by the question. Of course, you don't need to be old to have a bucket list. I'd never come across the expression at all until I saw the film of the same name, The Bucket List. Some of you may have seen the film. It stars two terminally ill patients played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman.

They meet in a hospital room and they come up with a plan to compile what they call a bucket list of all the things they want to do before they die. I can't remember now just how long they had to live. And it's quite a list and some are very extravagant desires that they want to fulfill before they die. So they drive a racing car, they go skydiving, they climb the pyramids and so on and so forth. Of course, the phrase itself, a bucket list, I presume derives from, again, the slang expression of kicking the bucket as an expression to describe dying. So a bucket list is a list of what you're going to do or what you want to do before you die. Well, do you have a list of that nature? And if you don't and you had to think about one, what would you put on that list? What would you want to do before you die? We were reminded, of course, this morning that that is a reality that none of us can escape from. We will all die. Unless the Lord comes before that happens, we will all die.

What would you want to do before you die? We read a moment ago about a man called Simeon. I imagine Simeon had never heard of such a silly thing as a bucket list, but if he had had such a list, there would have just been one item on it. I don't even know if you can have a list of one, but if you can, his list would have had just one item on it. And it would have been what we're told in our reading that he might see the consolation of Israel. We read that in verse 25 that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. This was his great desire that he might see it before he died. It was his sole great desire. And with that desire fulfilled, as it was in the manner in which we've read in the passage before us, having fulfilled that desire, he could ask of God as he did, now dismiss your servant in peace. I'm ready to die, Simeon was able to declare, because I have seen, I have experienced the one thing that I wanted to and had this great need to experience before I die.

[3 : 32] The opening words of his prayer or song of praise are often known by the Latin words, for now dismiss, or nunc dimittis. And it's, of course, been arranged musically, understandably so, and some are maybe familiar with that. Well, this evening we want to spend a little time considering this desire of Simeon. And as we do, see in what way we can draw applications for ourselves.

The first thing we want to just notice and just think about a little bit more is this great desire, desire, his great desire, spoken of here, as we've just noticed a moment ago, as the consolation of Israel. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. What was that? What does that mean, the consolation of Israel? Well, the very expression, without even having any of the background, without exploring in any depth at all, the implications of the phrase, just the words themselves give us a clue. The word consolation implies a certain reality. Indeed, it requires a certain reality. And that reality is distress. There's no need for consolation in the absence of trouble, in the absence of distress. And so, we can begin there. His great desire was that in some way the distress of Israel be remedied by the consolation of Israel.

[5 : 14] So, in what way was Israel in distress? Well, there would have been many contemporaries of Simeon who would have gladly answered that question, and that they would have pointed unequivocally and vigorously to the Roman oppressors.

And they'd have said, yes, indeed, Israel is in great distress, oppressed under the yoke of Rome. And, of course, that was true. But you can be sure that that was not Simeon's principal concern. He may well have been concerned about that, but it was not his principal concern. And this was not the fundamental distress that required a consolation.

Rather, as Simeon well knew, and as other pious Jews, few though they were, also recognized, Israel was far from God.

Israel had, in great measure, turned its back on God. And the oppression that they were experiencing was the outcome, was the result, was the consequence of their own sin and rebellion. [6 : 21] And what Israel required was the one through whom consolation would come, the promised Messiah, Simeon.

As he was awaiting the consolation of Israel, was awaiting the coming of the Messiah, who would bring consolation to Israel.

This was his great hope, as it was the great hope of Anna, who we also read of. We're not going to be thinking about Anna this evening, but in the passage we're also introduced to this other character, Anna, who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

A different language to describe the same reality, the redemption of Jerusalem, of course, also resting on the coming of Messiah, the one who would bring consolation, the one who would bring salvation to the oppressed people of God.

Simeon knew that any man-centered endeavor to save Israel was doomed to failure. Only God, through his promised Messiah, could bring consolation and salvation.

[7 : 35] And this was Simeon's great desire. He would die happy. He would die at peace if he could but see the consolation of Israel.

Now, though Simeon wouldn't have been able to express it in these terms, at least until the encounter that we read of, in effect, his lifelong desire was to see Jesus, to see Messiah Jesus, the one sent to bring consolation, to bring redemption, to bring salvation to his people.

This was his great desire. And I posed the question to myself, and I posed it to you this evening.

What about you? What is your great desire? You were to identify your great desire in life.

Even as you ponder on and acknowledge your own mortality, and the day will come when you will die. Before that day, what is your great desire? What is it you desire above all else?

For Simeon, it was clear. His great desire was that he would see the consolation of Israel, that he would see the coming of Messiah. It's your great desire to see Jesus.

[8 : 54] Now, as we draw an application, you might say, and rightly so, that we are in a different place in the history of redemption to Simeon. We don't look forward to the coming of Jesus.

We look back to his coming. We've just celebrated Christmas, and we look back to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

We are in a different place. And yet, even though we're in a different place historically, I think we can legitimately draw from, learn from, and emulate Simeon in our desire to see Jesus.

I can think of three ways in which we can share Simeon's desire. In fact, we could maybe think about it in this way, to allow you to make use of your imagination.

Imagine if Simeon was alive today, the man we were introduced to in the passage we've read. And even in this passage, there's enough about him for us to have an idea of the kind of man he was.

[9 : 59] Well, imagine he was alive today. What do you think Simeon's great desire would be if he were alive today? Well, I'm sure his great desire, if he were alive today, would be in many ways very similar to the great desire that we're told he had when he lived so long ago.

It would be to see Jesus. It would be to see Jesus in his own life. It would be to see Jesus coming in saving power in the lives of others, bringing consolation and salvation to the lost and the needy and the distressed.

And it would be surely to see Jesus come again. As we have promised, he will come again in glory and majesty to judge the living and the dead. I have no doubt that would be his great desire.

And so, in that sense, we too can learn from and emulate Simeon as we think of these ways in which we also can see Jesus.

Think about that desire to see him for ourselves. Simeon, of course, saw Jesus for himself. He saw Jesus with his very own eyes.

[11 : 09] He held him in his arms in that tender picture that is painted for us by Luke. We can't see Jesus in that way, but we can desire to see more of Jesus in ourselves.

We are, even as we just sung a few moments ago, we are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. And so, there can be that desire that we would see more of Jesus in ourselves, in our own lives.

As we're about to begin a new year, as we're about to begin 2016, would that not be a good desire to implant, to cultivate in our lives as we look ahead to the year that is about to begin, that we would see more of Jesus in ourselves.

But, of course, in the case of Simeon, his principal concern wasn't himself. It was, of course, a great delight for Simeon to see Jesus with his very own eyes, but his great concern went beyond himself. His concern was to see the Messiah who would bring consolation to Israel, not just to Simeon. Of course, Simeon was part of Israel. But he saw beyond his own personal needs and need of a Savior.

[12 : 25] He saw the need of his people of Israel. And may that also be a desire that characterizes us, that we would see Jesus coming in consoling and saving power in the lives of many.

That is a desire that we can and must have and cultivate, that Jesus would come and bring consolation and bring salvation to the lost and the despairing and the hopeless, that God would gather in his own people, those who as yet are without hope and without God.

Is this your desire that you would see Jesus in this way? But then also, to see Jesus come again. That might be the most obvious parallel to Simeon's desire to see the consolation of Israel, to see the coming of Messiah.

Well, we too long to see the coming of Jesus, that he would come again as he has promised that he will do so. Simeon longed for the first coming of Jesus.

He didn't conceive of it in terms of first and second coming, but he longed for the coming of Jesus. Well, we long for the coming of Jesus also. We long to see his work of consolation and salvation fully consummated.

[13 : 48] We long to see him come in glory and majesty. The writer to the Hebrews describes believers as those who are waiting for the coming of Jesus.

In chapter 9 and in verse 28, we read, We are those who wait for the coming of Jesus.

The apostle Paul expresses that same reality, but with much greater or greater feeling as he writes to Timothy in the second letter and in chapter 4 and in verse 8, we read, Now that is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

All who have longed for his appearing. All who are waiting. All for whom their great desire is the coming of Jesus.

His return in glory as he will indeed return in a day that is unknown to us. Is this your great desire?

[15 : 08] Simeon's great desire was that Jesus might come, that the Messiah might come. May that also be our great desire, that Jesus might come again.

His great desire, but we can move on and describe that desire a little more, identify one characteristic of that desire, and that is that it was a confident desire.

It's one thing to have a great desire, whatever that might be, but it's another thing to be able to expect its fulfillment. In the film that I mentioned just at the beginning, The Bucket List, Morgan Freeman's character was only able to fulfill some of his desires thanks to the intervention of his newfound friend, who, very conveniently, happened to be a billionaire.

So the more extravagant desires were possible because of the almost unlimited financial resources of his newfound friend. Of course, most of us don't have billionaire friends who can bankroll extravagant desires that we might have on any bucket list that we might have for ourselves.

You can have a desire, you can have a great desire, but what expectation that it would come to a reality. But when we read about Simeon, we discover one, we're introduced to one who was altogether confident that his great desire would be fulfilled.

[16 : 42] And why is it that Simeon enjoyed such confidence? Well, he enjoyed such confidence because of the word of the Spirit that he was able to read and to hear that granted him confidence that his desire would be fulfilled.

Simeon, we're told, was a devout man. He was familiar with the Scriptures. He was familiar with many of the promises concerning the coming of a Messiah.

He knew that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent. He knew that there was a king who would come, whose dominion, whose reign would be everlasting, that would outshine even the reign of King David.

David and Solomon, the great heroes of Israel, they had their day, but then they died. But Simeon knew that a king would come whose kingdom was a never-ending kingdom.

He knew the words of the Lord recorded by the prophet Isaiah at the beginning of chapter 40 as it anticipates the coming of Messiah. And it does so with these words of God, Comfort, comfort my people.

[17 : 59] Words that pointed to a Messiah who would come as a comforter, as one who would bring consolation to a distressed people.

Simeon would have been familiar, I'm sure, with other words that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah. Let's just remind ourselves of one passage that speaks very powerfully concerning the coming of a comforter, of a Messiah in Isaiah 49.

And if we read from verse 13, Shout for joy, O heavens! Rejoice, O earth! Burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord comforts His people! And will have compassion on His afflicted ones. But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion in the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you.

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are ever before me. And the prophet goes on. And Simeon knew that his God was a God who would keep His promises, that a comforter would come.

[19 : 10] And so, his desire and his expectation was a confident one, grounded in the promises of Scripture. He was confident of his desire being fulfilled for that reason.

It wasn't just a desire that had emerged in his mind. It was grounded on the Word of God. But, of course, in Simeon's case, he had more, more even than the written Word of God.

In the case of Simeon, the Spirit had spoken to him. In verse 26, we read, Immediately after being told that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel, we read that it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

It's not that the written Word of prophecy was insufficient for Simeon. It's not that Simeon needed another Word. But concerning the timing of the coming of Messiah in his own lifetime, that was something he could not have known had it not been for this Word that was directed to him in particular.

What about ourselves? What about our confidence concerning our great desire? If indeed our great desire echoes the desire of Simeon to see Jesus, what confidence can we have?

[20 : 33] What confidence with respect to the coming of Jesus, his coming in our own lives, his coming to save, his coming again? Well, as with Simeon, our confidence is all grounded in the Word and promises of God.

God has promised to transform us into the image of his Son. God has promised that his Word will not return to him void, that he will gather in his people, that none will be lost.

God has promised that his Son will return in glory. And so we, with Simeon, we rest in the promises of God and can share Simeon's confident desire, a great desire, but also a confident desire.

But the third aspect of it that I want to just notice is that this desire is what I'm calling an accompanied desire. What do I mean by that? Really what I'm driving at is, or maybe it can be seen by posing it in terms of a question, and the question is this, does Simeon just wait?

We're told that he was waiting for the consolation of Israel. That's the language that we find there in verse 25. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel. Well, what does that mean?

[21 : 46] Does it mean that Simeon had his arms folded and was entirely passive, simply waiting? Is that what we can gather from the passage before us?

Well, I think we can say rather that his waiting was expectant and active. Now, it is the case that there is nothing Simeon can do that will accelerate the coming of Messiah.

There is nothing that Simeon can do in that regard. His coming is one that is certain, but it is also a coming that has been determined from all eternity.

Nothing Simeon can do to accelerate that coming. And yet, though he cannot accelerate that coming, there is much that he can do as he awaits that coming.

And we can draw from the manner in which he has described that that was true of Simeon. We're told that he was righteous. And what does that mean? Well, it means that he lived a life that was pleasing to God and in harmony with God's law.

[22 : 50] Indeed, we could say this, that his life in a small measure brought consolation to Israel. Of course, not in the measure that would be seen and experienced with the coming of Messiah, but we can say that in his own life, he brought consolation to Israel as he lived his life in the service of

others, as he reflected something of the love and mercy of God to others.

He was righteous. We're told also that he was devout. Then in verse 25, a man, Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was a man of the Word, a man of prayer.

He spoke to others of the coming Messiah. We can be sure of that. And he prayed to God that Messiah might come quickly. You might say, well, why pray?

If he, in this very privileged way, had been told by the Spirit of God that he would see the Lord's Christ, well, why pray? God has already said that the Lord's Christ will come and that I will see the Lord's Christ.

And yet, I am sure, though we're not told specifically, I'm sure that throughout his life, this had characterized his prayers to God. He prayed that Messiah would come and that Messiah would come quickly.

[24 : 09] It was his duty to pray. It was his desire and his delight to do so. He was righteous. He was devout. It's also clear that he was sensitive to the Spirit's voice.

We say, what a privileged man. And the Spirit spoke to him. And yet, there are two sides to that. Yes, the Spirit spoke to him, but he listened. And he heard the Spirit as the Spirit spoke.

Now, we don't know how the Spirit spoke to him, how he addressed the words that are recorded here. We don't know precisely how he was led into the temple at precisely the moment when Joseph and Mary and Jesus were to be found there also.

We don't know how that precisely all panned out, but we do know that Simeon was sensitive to the Spirit's voice and the Spirit's leading. His waiting for the consolation of Israel was not a passive waiting.

It was an active waiting. And that is also something that we can just draw out in application for ourselves. As we ponder on our own desires, if indeed our desire is to see Jesus, to see Jesus in ourselves, to see Jesus come in saving power in the lives of others, to see Jesus return, to usher in the new heavens and the new earth, do we just wait passively for that to happen?

[25 : 32] We know it will happen. Thank God that it will happen. But do we simply wait passively? Or is our waiting, like Simeon's, to be an active waiting?

We must be active in cooperating with the Spirit's work in our own lives, active in making known the good news concerning Jesus to those that God places in our path, active as we await the return of the Lord, the kind of active waiting urged upon us by Peter.

In 2 Peter chapter 3 and from verse 11 we read, and we're interrupting Peter and his flow at a particular point, and we read this, what kind of people ought you to be?

Peter poses the question, and he answers the question, you ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat, but in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

[26 : 45] Peter is speaking of things that have been decreed in eternity, and you might say, well, it makes no difference how we live and what we do to the fulfilling or not of this promise.

It is God's promise. It will come to fulfillment. And yet Peter says, in the light of this, you must live holy and godly lives. And he even uses this language that we find difficult to understand, that we would speed its coming.

How can we speed? How can we hasten the coming of a day that has been fixed in all eternity? And yet this is the language that Peter uses to urge us that we might be characterized by what we're calling active waiting.

We wait, but we wait actively. But then finally, as we think of Simeon's desire, we can describe it or reflect on his fulfilled desire.

What a day for Simeon, the day that is described for us in the passage that we've read. Just imagine for a moment that day. He awakes from his sleep like every other day.

[27 : 54] Like every other day, we would imagine, though we're not told, as he made his way to the temple. But this day was different. I don't know if at the very beginning, at the very dawn of the day, Simeon was conscious that this day was different.

We don't know. But at some point in the day, there was this sense that this was a different day. Simeon, sensitive to the Spirit's leading, is led into the temple, a temple he had been in so many times before.

But on this occasion, he is brought to the temple just at the time that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are present also. And his eyes see what his life had been leading up to.

And what did his eyes see on that day? Well, what his eyes saw were or was a little baby.

That's what he saw, a little baby. And not a very important baby, the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. This is what he saw. He speaks and prays to God, my eyes have seen.

[29 : 07] And that's what he saw. He saw an infant child of a humble home. That is what he saw. How many other babies might have been there in the temple that day for the very same purpose that Jesus was there and his parents were there.

But he saw this baby, a baby. That's what he saw. But how does Simeon describe what he saw?

Well, in the song of praise, there from verse 29 and particularly from verse 30, we see how Simeon understands what he saw.

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 saw, in his arms, God's salvation. There before him, this infant child, and he sees in this child God's salvation.

A salvation, Simeon assures us, for all people. A salvation that brought revelation, God's truth, in the person of Jesus Christ to all.

[30 : 20] A salvation that revealed the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is what Simeon saw. And so now Simeon could ask God that he might depart in peace.

His great desire has been fulfilled. By the Spirit of God, he is able to identify in this child the consolation of Israel.

And so Simeon can say, now I can die happy. Now I can die fulfilled. Now I am ready to die. I can depart in peace.

To depart in peace is the best way to depart. We will all depart. We will all die. How will you die? Will you depart in peace? We sometimes speak of folks dying peacefully. And often we use that language to refer to the absence of physical pain or obvious distress.

[31 : 26] And quite understandably, we see that as a good thing, that somebody would die in those circumstances. And that is understandable. But when we speak of Simeon departing in peace, when Simeon himself speaks of departing in peace, he's not speaking about the absence of pain or physical distress or emotional distress of one kind or another.

Rather, Simeon could depart in peace because he had seen Jesus. He had seen his own eternal peace in the face of Jesus Christ.

Returning to the film that I've mentioned a couple of times, the bucket list, one of the more memorable lines in the film declares, and I quote, you only die once, so why not die with style? Now, dying with style may sound good in a film, but in the real world, what we all ultimately need is to die with peace, to depart in peace.

This was Simeon's experience. We don't know if it was soon after this encounter. We're not told whether he was granted his request. We don't even know if Simeon was an old man. We always just assume he was an old man.

[32 : 43] We don't know he was an old man. Maybe he lived for decades after this encounter. We don't know. But however long he lived, when the time came for him to depart, he departed in peace.

Why? Because he had seen Jesus. Because he had seen Jesus. That is why he could depart in peace. What about you?

When the time comes for you to depart, will you depart in peace? Jesus, how will you die? Maybe you could draw this final lesson for us as we draw things to a close.

How you die, how I die, how any of us die, depends entirely and absolutely on what your heart desires and what your eyes have seen.

Is it your great desire to see Jesus? And is it your experience that you have seen Jesus? Because for such, this is what awaits us when the time comes that we with Simeon can depart in peace.

[33 : 49] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the promises of your word. We thank you that we with Simeon can await with confidence the coming of your son Jesus.

as we thank you for his first coming to save and to pay the penalty for sin. But we look forward to his second coming when he will return in glory and majesty to gather his people to himself and to usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

We thank you that we look forward to that day even though we do not know when it will be. Unlike Simeon, we do not have reason to assert that it will be in our own lifetime but we can share his confidence that it will be.

And we thank you that that confidence is grounded in the solid ground of your word and the promises of your word. As we look forward to a more, perhaps, in all likelihood, more imminent event for all of us, our own departure, we pray that we would know something of that confidence of Simeon, of that experience of Simeon, that he could look forward to death with complete expectation that it was good for him to depart, to depart in peace, having seen the consolation of Israel.

That that would be true for us also, that we might be those who have seen in Jesus our own consolation, the consolation, the salvation of all of God's people. And with that being true of us, we can look forward to death, whenever that might be, with that quiet and humble confidence that we depart in peace.

[35 : 36] We go to be with Jesus, which is better by far. And these things we pray in his name. Amen.