

Providential Encounters

A question as we begin today . . . how often might it be that ordinary people, people like you and me, would be given the great opportunity and blessing of having an actual face to face encounter with the very person of Jesus Christ? We'll probably never know the answer to that question while we remain on this side of heaven. But those encounters may actually take place far more often than we would imagine.

Those encounters are spoken about often in these scriptures. Some of the most familiar encounters are those written about in the gospels, the Lord Jesus walking about, preaching and teaching and healing broken bodies.

But there were other times, especially in the Old Testament when men and women encountered God, sometimes not even realizing who they were talking to.

Moses encountered God as he was tending his sheep in the wilderness, but he very quickly came to realize with whom he was talking.

Abraham also encountered God and on more than one occasion. In Genesis chapter 18, we read the account of a time when three men suddenly appeared outside the tent of Abraham, telling Abraham that they were on their way to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, that the people who lived there had become so wicked that they all deserved to die. One of the men also told Abraham that his wife would soon bear a child in her old age.

In those scriptures, we can see plainly that it was the "Lord", who appeared to Abraham. The word "Lord", as it is given there, is the very special word that means "Jehovah God". And Abraham knew, within his spirit, that this man was God Himself, and Abraham addressed the man as God, calling Him "Adonai", which means, "my Lord and My God".

Again, the question that I asked a moment ago, "How often might it be that ordinary people, even people like you and me, will be given the great opportunity and blessing of having an actual face to face encounter with the very person of Jesus Christ?"

Here in today's scripture text, we find just such an encounter taking place, two dear souls, not mentioned again in these scriptures, but for these few moments,

enjoying the opportunity of a lifetime. And we see how they responded to their encounter. Listen, beginning in verse 25 of Luke chapter 2.

²⁵And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, ²⁸he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: ²⁹ "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation ³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, ³² A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel."

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

³⁶Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:25-38)

Think with me for a moment about these special encounters, both those in the Old Testament and those here in the New Testament. First, recognize that these encounters did not simply take place by "chance". They did not just "happen". They were all special appointed times and circumstances.

Moses was minding his own business, shepherding sheep, as he did every day, when suddenly a bush near him began to burn, but not burn up. And a voice called out to him, drawing him into a conversation, a conversation that would eventually lead to the establishing of his nation of people, and to the salvation of their souls. And yes, even ours!

And please take note also that it was not Abraham who sought out God to talk to Him about Sodom and Gomorrah and about the rampant sin that was controlling the people of those towns. No, it was all from God's own initiation. God came to Abraham.

And now here, we have these two dear old souls, Simeon and Anna, doing what they did on a daily basis, and suddenly, they had their special encounter with God.

And folks, that is the way of our Lord. In the Book of Hebrews, we are told that God is the "Author and the Perfector" of our faith. As the "Author", that means that He, God, takes the first step towards us and then He carries it on forward to completion.

God initiates the relationship that we have with Him. He does not wait upon or depend upon our "free will" to provoke us to step forward. It is not our nature to take the first step towards Him and He knows that. He tells us in Romans chapter 3 that no one seeks God. And so, as John chapter 6 tells us, God takes the first step and "draws us to Himself". And then after we have come to Him, His Spirit continues to provoke us on to do the "love and the good works" that are ours to do.

That special encounter that Abraham and Sarah had with God that day was an intentionally appointed time and opportunity in their life, an encounter through which God would reveal to Sarah that she would have a child, the beginning of a great and eternal kingdom of men and women that would never suffer an end, a kingdom of men that would someday lead to and bear this same Baby Christ Child Jesus that Simeon and Anna were now meeting for the first time.

Here in our scripture text for today, this old man and woman, Simeon and Anna, were rewarded with their special encounter with God in the person of this little Baby Jesus. And please do always remember that God has an intentional purpose within every opportunity He offers to us.

Simeon was here being invited to take part in the very special ministry of the "proclamation of the gospel, the 'good news' of the arrival of Christ our Savior". Listen to these words!

²⁹ "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation ³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, ³² A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

These words seem simple enough, but they are not simple at all. These are profound and powerful words, words that tell you and me that “hope” has now become “deliverance”. The Christ has come to bring salvation to each, and to all of us, not just to the Jew, but also to you and me, the Gentiles. Simeon's words again,

²⁹ “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation ³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, ³² A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32)

And yes, these announcements had been made earlier, on several occasions, by the prophets and especially by God's holy angels. But it was especially important for men to begin to see the face of Christ and to recognize and to proclaim that He had truly come to live among men. The “Immanuel” “God with us” was here.

And note too, that God “blesses” the ones He has His encounters with. Like Abraham and Sarah, Simeon and Anna were greatly blessed by God.

And note in these words also, as with Abraham, God's very intentional design and guidance to bring Simeon to this exact place, at this exact moment in time. Verse 27, “So he came by the Spirit into the temple.” Folks, this was “providential” not “coincidental” or “accidental”.

God is ever and always the initiator, the “Author and the Perfector” of our faith, bringing us into special encounters and causing us to think and to do exact things at exact times, things that we would not otherwise do.

. . . And then note here also in these few words of scripture, besides Simeon, we see a second providential encounter, another dear servant who was given a special blessing of meeting Jesus face to face. Her name was Anna. And Anna is described here as being a prophetess. Listen again!

³⁶Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; ³⁷and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

When we read about these brief encounters, we sometimes wonder about them. I must tell you that as I read through these particular words of scripture, I first wondered at God's purpose for including them in His holy text. But as I have spent more and more time reading and praying, I have found that there is an absolute treasure of worth within them, which serves as a reminder to me that God does not ever waste any of His words. Each and every utterance that comes to us through God's word is as 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us,

¹⁶All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

These accounts given to us here about a man, Simeon, and a woman, Anna, are given to us to thoroughly equip you and me for God's good work, and we ought to dig deeply into them to find the treasures that they hold.

Let's consider again, this man Simeon. He was a local man, one who lived in Jerusalem, a man who was devout in His relationship with the Lord, continually looking for the "Consolation of Israel". The words "Consolation of Israel" speak specifically of the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, this very one that Simeon was gazing at on this special day.

While it is not known exactly who this man Simeon was, it has been said by historians that there was a prominent man residing in Jerusalem at that time whose name was Simeon. That Simeon was the son of Hillel, the founder of a prominent college of theology, as well as also being the leader of the great Sanhedrin.

The Jews say that this particular Simeon was endowed with a prophetic spirit, but that he was not well received because he witnessed against the common belief that the Messiah would come and establish a temporal kingdom and would free the people from the oppression of the Romans.

We don't know if that Simeon was the same Simeon spoken about here in these scriptures, but it would seem to fit in that this Simeon also went against the common teachings of the day and looked expectantly for the coming of a "Spiritual" kingdom, a kingdom that would bring salvation not only to his own people, the Jews, but also to the Gentiles.

And note carefully in this account that the temple priests are not spoken about. Perhaps that is because the priests of that day were blinded to the real truth

about the coming of the Messiah, and God chose not to honor them with realizing that this baby was the Christ Child. God instead afforded that honor to an outsider.

Again, whether this Simeon is the same Simeon that the historians think was the son of Hillel or not, these words are plain and simple, he was a devout man who was given the special gift of being one of the first to recognize the presence of the Messiah, our "Immanuel" "God with us".

And Simeon made a clear and plain declaration of the true identity of the Child as he spoke of things to come, things that the child would grow to do that would bring both blessings and suffering to those who knew Him.

. . . Now again, this second person that we read about here in these words is a very elderly woman named Anna. She is said to be

³⁶ . . . a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher . . . a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. ³⁸And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

A prophet, whether they be a man or a woman, has been given a special gift of "speaking forth" the truths of God. We often like to think of a prophet as one who "foretells the future", and that might also take place. But the real gift of prophecy is the gift of knowing and of "telling forth" the words, the truths, the plans and purposes of God found in the scriptures. And Anna had that special Spiritual gift.

And like Simeon, Anna was drawn by the Spirit at the very moment that Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple to be dedicated. Yes, Anna was there all of the time, but these scriptures take special note that she came into their presence at that very moment. Listen again! Verse 38,

³⁸And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)

Anna was interrupted by the Spirit from her prayers and fasting to come and to take note of the special dedication service that was taking place in that portion of the temple. God wanted Anna to see Jesus so that she could tell others about Him. And she did!

And again, as with Simeon, this encounter was “Providential”, not “coincidental” and not “accidental”.

A question that I posed at the beginning of this message was, why does God take the opportunity to include these kinds of accounts within His word? Neither of these two individuals, Simeon nor Anna, are spoken about further in the scriptures.

While we can't know the complete answer to that question, it may be as simple as it is given here. God was satisfying the hopes and desires of those two children of His, Simeon and Anna, granting an answer to their prayers.

And folks, as God's dear children, He does the same for us, every day. Sometimes, we see His providential hand at work, meeting our hopes and dreams, but often we don't.

Why is it that we are so unaware of the guidance of God's Spirit as He brings us, you and me, to and through the special encounters that take place in our lives? Why can we not easily see and trust God's Providential Hand as He works in our lives?

Perhaps, we are simply too busy with all the many circumstances of our daily lives to recognize God's providential hand at work?

I do fear that that takes place far too often in my own daily life. I, too often, am blinded by my own busyness and I fail to see God's presence.

And I believe that the same is also probably true for you. And because of that, we treat those special encounters as just random occurrences. And as we do that, we miss out on the very special opportunities that God is inviting us to be a part of.

With Abraham, God was inviting him into His special counsel, an opportunity to intercede within the very Trinity of God, pleading for the lives of those broken and depraved people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And let me say to you and me in the strongest way that I can say it, “God is extending the same kind of invitation to you and to me.

Like as Abraham, and now here with Simeon and Anna, you and I are being invited to proclaim the great and wonderful presence of Christ our Savior.

Let me ask you! When the Lord decides to have a special encounter with you, will you welcome His presence? And will you welcome some opportunity for ministry that He will draw you into? Are you truly open to Christ coming to visit with you at any time?

You and I need to be as Simeon and Anna, and to always be waiting and expecting to see the day that Christ will come to visit with us.

And you and I need to follow Abraham's example and to have a welcoming heart.

Folks, in this message, God is doing the same thing that he did with Abraham and with Simeon and Anna. He is taking the first step towards us. And He wants you and me to respond and to join with Him in the things that He is doing on this earth.

Are we willing to hear His still small voice and to have our personal encounters with Christ? Listen to the words of Revelation 3:20 as I close.

²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²²“He who has an ear, let him hear. (Revelation 3:20)