

“PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD”
Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40
December 30 & 31, 2017

Dr. Larry Crabb is a Christian counselor, author, Bible teacher and seminar speaker. Crabb has written several best-selling books and is the founder and director of New Way Ministries. Dr. Crabb “recalls an incident in the church he attended as a young man. It was customary in this church that young men were encouraged to participate in the Communion services by praying out loud. Feeling the pressure of expectation, the young Crabb (who had a problem with stuttering) stood to pray. In a terribly confused prayer, he recalls ‘thanking the Father for hanging on the cross and praising Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave.’

“When he was finished, he vowed he would never again speak or pray out loud in front of a group.

“At the end of the service, not wanting to meet any of the church elders who might feel constrained to correct his theology, Crabb made for the door. Before he could get out, an older man named Jim Dunbar caught him.

“Having prepared himself for the anticipated correction, Crabb instead found himself listening to these words: ‘Larry, there's one thing I want you to know. Whatever you do for the Lord, I'm behind you one thousand percent.’

“Crabb reflects in his book, *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Zondervan, 1984): ‘Even as I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. I have yet to tell that story to an audience without at least mildly choking. **Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my being.**’¹

I share this story with you to help you to begin to understand the wonderful power that encouragement has. Just as young Larry Crabb received tremendous encouragement from the older Jim Dunbar, even after making a fool of himself in prayer, so each of us needs that kind of

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *MORE Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003] pg. 82-83)

support and uplifting to keep us growing in our faith and walking in a way that pleases the Lord God. While it is so common in our society today to belittle and cut each other down with critically destructive words and smart remarks, to look beyond the failure or struggle of a person and see the positives in the life of that one before us, and lift them up with positive and encouraging words makes a world of difference that transforms their life.

And that's what we see in our Gospel lesson today as we read the account of Jesus' dedication in the Temple. Mary and Joseph have taken Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to dedicate Him to the Lord, and two very interesting things happen. Listen to Luke 2:22-40. (READ Luke 2:22-40)

It's already been an interesting journey together for Mary and Joseph. The shocking news of what God was inviting them to do may have initially sent them into panic, but as they remembered that God promised to be with them, they get into a regular routine in their daily lives in Nazareth. Then, being forced to travel down to Bethlehem, was a very hard thing to do, but they made it, and Jesus was born while they were there. However the birthplace was not an ideal one, but we saw that with Jesus being born in the stable He was able to identify with the lowliest people and give them hope, too. The Shepherds rejoiced when they heard about and then saw for themselves the promised Messiah of God. In their rejoicing, many others heard about the fulfillment of the promise. It may have gotten very busy at the stable that night.

And after eight days, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to be named and circumcised at the local Temple in Bethlehem. And when Mary's time for the purification ceremony came a little over a month later, they all went to Jerusalem to dedicate Jesus to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice in order to "buy Him back from the Lord." And this is where things get interesting.

As the family comes into the Temple, there are two people there who have eagerly been seeking Jesus' presence. No, it wasn't Herod – the Wise Men hadn't arrived yet to tip him off as to the birth of the new-born King. No, Simeon and Anna are there in the Temple. Simeon is described as "*a good, God-fearing man ... awaiting for Israel to be saved.*" He is old and has

been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he sees the promised Messiah. We don't know what age he was when he was told this, but I can imagine that Simeon was waiting a long time for God to fulfill that promise.

We don't know if Simeon was a part of the priesthood, or if he was anyone important in the leadership of the Temple. We are just told that he was relying upon the Holy Spirit to guide him. He may have diligently studied the Scriptures to try to determine the time of the Messiah's arrival. And he may have gone into the Temple each day searching for the Messiah, eagerly wondering each day if IT would be the day that the Lord would show Him the Messiah. Day after day he goes into the Temple, and night after night he comes home again, having not found the Messiah. He could have easily lost hope while performing this seemingly fruitless search. In fact, many may have ridiculed him for believing that God would send the Messiah in his lifetime. But nonetheless, Simeon stays true to his search for the promised One.

Then the carpenter's family comes into the temple, Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus, and having already been prompted by the Holy Spirit to come to the Temple that day, Simeon recognizes Jesus right away as the Promised Messiah. He comes over and gently takes the baby Messiah in his arms.

WHAT A DAY! FINALLY IT WAS THE DAY FOR ISRAEL'S SAVING! Simeon praises God with wonderful words, *"Now, Lord, You have kept Your promise, and You may let Your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples; a light to reveal Your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to Your people Israel."*

Simeon knows, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Jesus is God's Messiah. He is not afraid to proclaim to the Lord God that he sees this in Jesus. Simeon acknowledges God's Son, and gives thanks to God for the answer to his many days of seeking for this child. You see, Simeon was not told whether the Messiah was going to be a child or a man; He was just invited to remain faithful in his search, knowing that he would see the Messiah before he died.

And imagine the people around in the Temple who overhear Simeon say this about Jesus. As he praises the Lord for showing him the Messiah, others may have picked up on this and stood still looking at the event. But since Jesus was just a baby, many may have become disappointed. The hope was for a real live Messiah who would free Israel from their enemies. How could a baby just over a month old do that? Though a small crowd may have gathered, it would have dissipated soon afterwards with the people dismissing Jesus as just another baby in the Temple. After all, Mary and Joseph were strangers to Jerusalem. No one knew them. And they were common, poor people, not really the making of a Messiah's family. One quick judgment and the people would have dismissed old Simeon's words as nonsense coming from a senile old man.

But Mary and Joseph are listening intently to the words that Simeon says. Jesus was to be the promised Messiah? They heard that from the angel Gabriel. Jesus was to be a light to the Gentiles? Was God going to save them, too? Why not? If God would save the people of Israel, why wouldn't He reach out to those of other nationalities, too? Jesus was to bring glory back to the people of Israel? WOW! Now that caught their ears.

With each statement of Simeon's prayer to God, Joseph and Mary stand in awe, considering the wonderful statements being made about this little Baby. Was God really entrusting them with the Savior of the World? Was the angel really right about Jesus? Would He really become the Messiah that all of Israel had been waiting for? But what if everyone around came to that realization? What would they do with Jesus? Would they take Him away from them and raise Him before the Lord just as Samuel was during the time of Eli the priest? Or maybe the priests would become jealous and try to eliminate Jesus, too. They listen intently at what Simeon is saying and they are encouraged by the words. They may have begun to praise God for Jesus, too, as Simeon is speaking. Such encouragement to Mary and Joseph at this very time of their lives gave them the courage and reassurance they needed to do their very best for the baby Jesus.

And as Simeon finishes and gives Jesus back to Mary, Simeon tells her one more thing. *“This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart”* (Lk. 2:34-35). As encouraging as the praise was of Simeon thanking God for allowing him to see the Messiah, reality has to be spoken as well. This child, this baby Jesus, would grow up to challenge people and strive to bring many to deeper faith in the Lord God. But in the process, He would offend many and they would reject Him and abuse Him and do the things that break the hearts of any mother for her child. Yes, there would be great things for this child, but great sorrow would also be a part of the picture.

But as they turn to leave the Temple, another person is right there to also acclaim the glory of God for the work He would do through this little one. The prophetess Anna was a widow of great age who spent a great deal of time at the Temple. Since her husband had died, Anna spent time at the Temple, praying and fasting and seeking the messianic deliverance of Jerusalem. I would say for at least 60 years, this devout Jewish woman spent time before the Lord with the desire to live in a way that pleases Him, possibly living in one of the rooms surrounding the temple precinct and being cared for by the Temple leaders.

Anna is right there to give further encouragement to Mary and Joseph. She also tells those in the Temple that God has fulfilled His promise by providing a Messiah for the nation Israel. Again, I don't know how much people gave attention to her, because we have no record of others joining in with her acclamation to the Lord for His faithfulness in bring a Messiah into their midst. It may have been clear that the Holy Spirit was speaking through her, as He did in Zechariah, and Elizabeth and Simeon, but no one seems to take the time to listen to what she is saying.

But Mary and Joseph are once more attuned to her every word. This is now the second voice validating what the angel of the Lord had told them about Jesus even before He was

conceived. And in that day, when there was more than one witness to the same event telling the same thing, it was counted as true. Had it been only Simeon or just Anna telling of these things that the Lord was doing in the life of Jesus, a person could have discounted the news. But with two of them proclaiming the same thing to those in the Temple, you would think that people would have started to take notice of it. However, it may have been just like today where everyone is so into what they are doing that we just don't take the time to become aware of the things happening around us, and we miss the start of big events.

The encouragement that Mary and Joseph received from Simeon and Anna would have been huge for them. Luke records them as fulfilling all of the requirements of the Jewish law regarding the birth of their first-born son. They would have had a tremendous amount to talk about on their way home. There would have been ample support for these two parents from the Lord God that this little baby boy was indeed very special and was about to change the history of the world by becoming the Messiah for all who believe.

I don't know about you, but when God speaks to me in similar ways, encouraging me to keep focused on doing His work according to His way while relying upon Him for guidance and strength, I usually get the hint pretty early and respond by following the Lord's direction. Who else in the world could ever deliver on his promises such as the Lord does? Who else could provide and arrange and accommodate for all our needs better than the Lord our God? Can anyone provide wisdom and courage like the Lord can? No. Our God and Father of the Universe is able to do all things, and when we can encourage each other to prepare for Him, and let **Him prepare us** for Him to do the great things He has for us, there is nothing like it in all the earth.

Let the Lord prepare you for His greatness as you seek Him, follow Him and obey Him in all that you do, to the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.