

The Comforter Cometh

By: Keith Keyser

“And 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.” Luke 2:25

In this world of sorrow people yearn for deliverance from life's problems and stresses. If only someone could give them relief from the things that oppress their spirits and make their lives drudgery, they reason, then their lives would be ideal. First-century Israel was no different, for the Jews of that day longed for liberation from the onerous yolk of Rome as well as a restoration of the glories of their independent past. Against this backdrop, a devout man named Simeon walked into the Temple precincts one day in order to see the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. His aspirations went far beyond nationalistic sentiments or personal desires for an easier life. Rather, he awaited the coming of “the Consolation of Israel” – the advent of the Messiah, a person whose life and actions would have cosmic and eternal effect for Israel and the nations.

Thou Wilt Command Thy Servant's Consolationⁱ

The translators of *The New King James Version* rightly capitalize “Consolation” in Luke 2:25, recognizing that it is a messianic title, and not merely a description of an activity towards Israel. It is true that the nation will one day be consoled – in addition to many other nations that will share in the blessing of Christ’s millennial reign – yet one must remember that this comfort is bound up in one person: the Messiah Jesus.ⁱⁱ The phrase “the Consolation of Israel” certainly had technical messianic overtones in other contemporary Jewish sourcesⁱⁱⁱ, and later Rabbinic Judaism frequently employed it to refer to the Messiah.^{iv} As one historian notes: “In Rab. Judaism the 'consolation of Israel' is a blanket term for the fulfillment of Messianic expectation...”^v Another author agrees: “...‘the consolation of Israel,’ is rooted in the consolation language which in Isaiah is connected with God’s eschatological restoration of his people ([Isa 40:1; 49:13; 51:3; 52:9; 57:18; 66:10–11](#)).”^{vi} David Gooding further elucidates the origins of this expression, saying:

The delightful term 'consolation of Israel' suggests that his expectation was based on the programme enunciated in such passages as Isaiah 40ff. He was looking for the day when Israel's warfare and chastisement would be over, and God would 'comfort his people'. Nor was Simeon narrowly concerned simply for the future of Israel. Basing himself again on Isaiah's predictions (e.g. 42:6; 49:6 etc.) he foresaw the time when the light of God's salvation would spread to the very ends of the earth (see 2:31-32).^{vii}

Comfort Ye My People

After all of the awful things that happened to Israel in antiquity, the nation collectively felt an understandable desire for comfort from their woes. As the land in between competing

southern and northern superpowers – Egypt, Aram, Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia to name but a few – they experienced periodic military invasions. They were also harassed by their western and eastern neighbors: Philistia, Edom, Moab, and Ammon. At the end of the Old Testament period, Babylonian captivity successively gave way to Medo-Persian and Hellenistic domination. The outward assaults were matched by inward spiritual declension, as the Jewish people repeatedly struggled with departure from the Lord, bringing in idolatry, perversion, disunity, and spiritual impoverishment. In addition to these national calamities, individual Israelites felt the weight of personal sin, as well the burdens of living in a fallen world.^{viii} Yet the Lord spoke of personally comforting His people in the future as their perfect Shepherd King (Isa. 40.) As two linguists assert: “Comforting is God’s proper work. He turns earlier desolation into perfect consolation both in individuals...and also in the people of God, cf. Is. 54:11 ff.; 51:19 ff.”^{ix} Subsequent pogroms, pervasive anti-Semitism, and the horrors of the Holocaust (*ha-Shoah*, to the Jews) augment the needed comfort for the Jewish people. The future time of Jacob’s trouble – the Tribulation of the New Testament – will turn the nation’s eyes to its Messiah (e.g. Zech. 12:1-13:1; Rom. 11:25-29.) The Consoler of Israel will defend them and usher in His reign among them.

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Luke 2:25 is pregnant with the expectation of what Peter called “the restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21.) Pious believers like Simeon patiently and earnestly awaited personal, national, and global deliverance from the powers of evil. Messiah’s kingdom will eventually fulfill all of the prophecies for Israel’s restoration and glory, as well as accomplish the ultimate triumph over sin and evil in the universe. Charles Wesley’s classic hymn captures the spirit of Simeon’s rejoicing heart:

*Come, Thou long expected Jesus Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s Strength and Consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.^x*

As Woudstra writes: “Thus in one comprehensive gesture we see all the messianic prophecies plus all the saving interventions of God in behalf of His people summed up in this one beautiful phrase: the consolation of Israel.”^{xi}

God’s New Creation is centered in the person and work of His glorious Son. This man will console His redeemed people during His Millennial reign and the eternal kingdom that lies beyond it (Isa. 66 and Rev. 21-22.) In his imitable way, J. Vernon McGee straightforwardly articulates the centrality of Christ in His Father’s plans for the present and future manifestations of His salvation: “God had promised Simeon that he would *see* the salvation of God. What did he see? He saw a little Baby. Salvation is a Person, and not something that you *do*. Salvation is a Person, and that Person is the Lord Jesus Christ. You either have Him, or you don’t have Him. You either trust Him, or you don’t trust Him.”^{xii}

Things Future, Nor Things That Are Now^{xiii}

While Isaiah 40:1-2 and Luke 2:30-32 teach that “the Consolation of Israel” will one day extend His comfort over all the earth, He also presently gives His comfort to those know Him by faith. This personal Comforter presently ministers for His children before the throne of God (1 John 2:1-2; Heb. 7:24-28.) In their struggles and trials He consoles His people. As James G. Deck’s poetry fittingly express this truth in song:

*O JESUS, gracious Saviour,
Upon the Father's throne ---
Whose wondrous love and favour
Have made our cause Thine own;
Thy people to Thee ever
For grace and help repair,
For Thou, they know, wilt never
Refuse their griefs to share.*

*O Lord, through tribulation
Our pilgrim-journey lies,
Through scorn and sore temptation,
And watchful enemies;
Midst never-ceasing dangers
We through the desert roam;
As pilgrims here and strangers,
We seek the rest to come.*

*O Lord, Thou too once hasted
This weary desert through,
Once fully tried and tasted
Its bitterness and woe;
And hence Thy heart is tender
In truest sympathy,
Though now the heavens render
All praise to Thee on high.*

*O by Thy Holy Spirit
Reveal in us Thy love,
The joy we shall inherit
With Thee, our Head above;
May all this consolation
Our trembling hearts sustain,*

*Sure --- though through tribulation ---
The promised rest to gain.^{xiv}*

Do our hearts rejoice in the great Consoler ? Like Simeon are we looking for His coming? Or do the things of this world distract us from our Lord and Savior? Let every saint examine themselves to ensure that they are currently enjoying fellowship with and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who seek strength and comfort from Him will never be disappointed. As the Psalmist says: “When I thought, ‘My foot slips,’ your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul” (Psa. 94:18-19, ESV.)

ⁱ Anonymous paraphrase of Psa. 42, “As pants the hart for streams,” found here:

<http://nethymnal.org/htm/a/p/h/aphfstrm.htm> <http://nethymnal.org/htm/a/p/h/aphfstrm.htm> Accessed on 3/31/11.

ⁱⁱ The terms Messiah (Hebrew) & Christ (Greek) are equivalent, & when not transliterated are best translated “Anointed One.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Plummer affirms that “Those 'who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death' (i.79) need *consolation*; and the salvation which the Messiah was to bring was specially called such by the Jews...There was a belief that a time of great troubles (dolores Messiae) would precede the coming of the Christ. Hence the Messiah Himself was spoken of as 'the Consoler,' or 'the Consolation.'" Alfred Plummer, *ICC: A Critical & Exegetical Commentary On The Gospel According To St. Luke*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903, p. 66. [Italics in the original.]

Farrar adds that “‘May I see the consolation of Israel!’ was a common Jewish formula, and a prayer for the Advent of the Messiah was daily used.” F.W. Farrar, *The Cambridge Bible For Schools & Colleges: Luke*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1890, p. 72. Compare the Pseudepigraphical work of the first or second century A.D., 2 Baruch 44:7: “For if ye endure and persevere in His fear, And do not forget His law, The times shall change over you for good. **And ye shall see the consolation of Zion.**” *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. Edited by Robert Henry Charles. Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004. [Emphasis mine.] For background on 2 Baruch, see James H. Charlesworth, “Baruch, Book of 2 (Syriac)” in Freedman, David Noel. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1. New York: Doubleday, 1996, pp. 620f.

The Dead Sea Scrolls also evidence this messianic association of “the consolation.” Referring to one of them, 4Q176, Hatina remarks: “Fragments 1–11 are of greater value for NT studies. They are a fairly well preserved anthology of biblical texts. Except for the possible reference to *Psalm 79:2–3* at the beginning of the first fragment, all of the quotations are taken from what is today called *Second Isaiah*, namely, *Isaiah 40:1–5; 41:8–10; 43:1–7; 49:7, 13–18; 51:22–23b; 51:23c–52:3; 54:4–10a*. The quotations are arranged sequentially and preserved accurately, which suggests that the compiler read progressively through *Isaiah 40–55* and recorded certain texts. While the fragmentary condition of the document prevents us from understanding the broader significance that the quotations once had for the *Qumran* community, an informed inference can be made on the basis of a common theme running through the quotations. In every quotation *Yahweh* offers words of consolation or comfort—the meaning of the Hebrew word *Tanhumim* in the title given the scroll—to his people Israel by assuring them that he is a faithful and loving God who will soon bring restoration to those in despair. Although *Second Isaiah* was originally concerned with the release of the Israelites from Babylonian exile, the *Qumran* community interpreted these texts as prophecies relevant for their own day.” Thomas R. Hatina, “Consolations/*Tanhumin* (4 Q176)” in Porter, Stanley E., and Craig A. Evans. *Dictionary of New Testament Background : A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. electronic ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

^{iv} Darrel Bock comments: “In fact, later rabbis will call the Messiah Menahem, or Comforter (Schmitz and Stählin 1967:793; y. Berakot 2:3). It was such deliverance that Simeon expected.” Darrell L. Bock, *IVP NT Commentary: Luke*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1994, Electronic Edition STEP Files Copyright © 1997, Parsons Technology, Inc., PO Box 100, Hiawatha, Iowa.

^v G. Braumann, "Comfort" in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 1*, ed. Colin Brown. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971, p. 329.

^{vi} John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary : Luke 1:1-9:20*. Vol. 35A. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002, p. 118.

^{vii} D.W. Gooding, *According to Luke*. pp. 55f. Electronic ed., accessed here: keybibleconcepts.org on 3/29/11.

Morris' comments are also helpful: "*The consolation of Israel* for which he looked is another name for the coming of the Messiah (cf. SB). This was expected to be preceded by a time of great suffering ('the woes of the Messiah'), so that he would certainly bring comfort. In days when the nation was oppressed the faithful looked all the more intensely for the Deliverer who would solve their problems." Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Vol. 3. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988, p. 104 [Italics original.]

Other helpful quotes on Jewish understanding of the phrase:

"Simeon had waited for 'the consolation of Israel' (2:25), a term used for the hope of God's restoration of the theocracy to that nation." Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "The Davidic Covenant in the Gospels," *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 150:600 (Oct. '93). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1993, p. 466.

"The **consolation of Israel**, for which Simeon had waited, refers to the coming messianic age." Mark C. Black, *The College Press NIV Commentary: Luke*. College Press Publ. Co., 1998, p. 36 [Emphasis original.]

^{viii} Consider *Ecclesiastes* and *Malachi* just to name a few of the ancient laments against sin and injustice uttered by godly souls. Romans 8:22-26 articulates the groaning of the godly in this fallen world: "For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only *that*, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for *it* with perseverance. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

^{ix} Otto Schmitz & Gustav Stahlin, "παράκλησις" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 5. Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich. electronic ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964, pp. 789f.

^x Charles Wesley, "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord* (London: William Strahan, 1745), number 10. I quote the first stanza only, found here:

<http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/c/o/m/comtlong.htm> Accessed on 3/30/11.

^{xi} Martin H. Woudstra, "Theological Influence On Translation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 10*. Lynchburg, VA: Evangelical Theological Society, Spring 1967, p. 97.

^{xii} J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, Vol. 4. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 254. [Italics original.]

^{xiii} A.M. Toplady, "A Debtor to mercy alone," *Spiritual Songs*, #326 found here:
<http://www.stempublishing.com/hymns/ss/326> Accessed on 3/31/11.

^{xiv} J.G. Deck, "O Jesus Gracious Saviour," in *Spiritual Songs*, #187 found here:
<http://www.stempublishing.com/hymns/ss/187> Accessed on 3/31/11.