EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS.

ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
*And Many Explanatory Notes*.

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LUKE II 36-40.

36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Pha­nuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;

37 And she was a widow of about four-score and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served *God* with fastings and pray­ers night and day.

38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

39 And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Gali­lee, to their own city Nazareth.

40 And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.

THE verses we have now read introduce us to a servant of God whose name is nowhere else mentioned in the New Testament. The history of Anna, like that of Simeon, is related only by St. Luke. The wisdom of God ordained that a woman as well as a man should testify to the fact that Messiah was born. In the mouth of two witnesses it was established that Malachi’s prophecy was fulfilled, and the messenger of the covenant had suddenly come to the Temple. (Malachi iii. 1.)

Let us observe, in these verses, *the character of a holy woman before the establishment of Christ*’*s Gospel.* The facts recorded about Anna are few and simple. But we shall find them full of instruction.

Anna was a woman of irreproachable character. After a married life of only seven years duration, she had spent eighty-four years as a lone widow. The trials, desola­tion, and temptation of such a condition were probably very great. But Anna by grace overcame them all. She answered to the description given by St. Paul. She was “a widow indeed.” (1 Tim. iv. 5.)

Anna was a woman who loved God’s house. “She departed not from the temple.” She regarded it as the place where God especially dwelt, and toward which every pious Jew in foreign lands, like Daniel, loved to direct his prayers.” “Nearer to God, nearer to God,” was the desire of her heart, and she felt that she was never so near as within the walls which con­tained the ark, the altar, and the holy of holies. She could enter into David’s words, “my soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the Lord.” (Psalm lxxxiv. 2.)

Anna was a woman of great self-denial. She “served God with fastings night and day.” She was continually crucifying the flesh and keeping it in subjection by volun­tary abstemiousness. Being fully persuaded in her own mind that the practice was helpful to her soul, she spared no pains to keep it up.

Anna was a woman of much prayer. She “served God with prayer night and day.” She was continually communing with Him, as her best Friend, about the things that concerned her own peace. She was never weary of pleading with Him on behalf of others, and, above all, for the fulfilment of His promises of Messiah.

Anna was a woman who held communion with other saints. So soon as she had seen Jesus, she “spake of Him” to others whom she knew in Jerusalem, and with whom she was evidently on friendly terms. There was a bond of union between her and all who enjoyed the same hope. They were servants of the same Master, and travellers to the same home.

And Anna received a rich reward for all her diligence in God’s service, before she left the world. She was allowed to see Him who had been so long promised, and for whose coming she had so often prayed. Her faith was at last changed to sight, and her hope to certainty. The joy of this holy woman must indeed have been “unspeakable and full of glory.” (1 Peter i. 8.)

It would be well for all Christian women to ponder the character of Anna, and learn wisdom from it. The times, no doubt, are greatly changed. The social duties of the Christian are very different from those of the Jewish believer at Jerusalem. All are not placed by God in the condition of widows. But still, after every deduction, there remains much in Anna’s history which is worthy of imitation. When we read of her consis­tency, and holiness, and prayerfulness, and self-denial, we cannot but wish that many daughters of the Christian Church would strive to be like her.

Let us observe, secondly, in these verses, *the description given of saints in Jerusalem, in the time when Jesus was born.* They were people “who looked for redemption.”

Faith, we shall always find, is the universal character of God’s elect- These men and women here described, dwelling in the midst of a wicked city, walked by faith, and not by sight. They were not carried away by the flood of worldliness, formality, and self-righteousness around them. They were not infected by the carnal expectations of a mere worldly Messiah, in which most Jews indulged. They lived in the faith of patriarchs and prophets, that the coming Redeemer would bring in holiness and righteousness, and that His principal victory would be over sin and the devil. For such a Redeemer they waited patiently. For such a victory they earnestly longed.

Let us learn a lesson from these good people. If they, with so few helps and so many discouragements, lived such a life of faith, how much more ought we with a finished Bible and a full Gospel. Let us strive, like them, to walk by faith and look forward. The second advent of Christ is yet to come. The complete redemption of this earth from sin, and Satan, and the curse, is yet to take place. Let us declare plainly by our lives and conduct, that for this second advent we look and long. We may be sure that the highest style of Christianity even now is to “wait for redemption,” and to love the Lord’s appearing. (Rom. viii. 23; 2 Tim iv. 8.)

Let us observe, lastly, in these verses, *what clear proof we have that the Lord Jesus was really and truly man, as well as God.* We read, that when Mary and Joseph returned to their own city Nazareth, “the child grew and waxed strong in spirit.”

There is, doubtless, much that is deeply mysterious in the Person of the Lord Jesus. How the same Person could be at once perfect God and perfect man, is a point that necessarily passes our understanding. In what manner and measure, and in what proportion at the early part of His life, that Divine knowledge which He doubtless possessed, was exercised, we cannot possibly explain. It is a high thing. We cannot attain unto it.

One thing, however, is perfectly clear, and we shall do well to lay firm hold upon it. Our Lord partook of everything that belongs to man’s nature, sin only ex­cepted. As man He was born an infant. As man He grew from infancy to boyhood. As man He yearly increased in bodily strength and mental power, during His passage from boyhood to full age. Of all the sin­less conditions of man’s body—its first feebleness, its after growth, its regular progress to maturity,—He was in the fullest sense a partaker. We must rest satisfied with knowing this. To pry beyond is useless. To know this clearly is of much importance. A want of settled knowledge of it has led to many wild heresies.

One comfortable practical lesson stands out on the face of this truth, which ought never to be overlooked. Our Lord is able to sympathize with man in every stage of man’s existence, from the cradle to the grave. He knows by experience the nature and temperament of the child, the boy, and the young man. He has stood in their place. He has occupied their position. He knows their hearts. Let us never forget this in dealing with young people about their souls. Let us tell them confidently, that there is One in heaven at the right hand of God, who is exactly suited to be their Friend. He who died on the cross was once a boy Himself, and feels a special interest in boys and girls, as well as in grown up people.

NOTES. LUKE II. 36-40.

36.*—*[*A prophetess.*]This is a remarkable expression, and only used on one other occasion in the New Testament. (Rev. ii. 20.) If the word is to be taken in its fullest sense, it seems to show that the spirit of prophecy, which had been withheld for nigh four hundred years since Malachi’s time, was being restored to Israel when Christ was born. But as the word “prophet” does not necessarily imply, in the New Testament, the power of foretelling things to come, so also it may be with the word “prophetess.”

[*Tribe of Aser.*]This is remarkable, when we remember that Asher was one of the ten tribes who were carried into captivity, and never returned. We must conclude that a scattered remnant of them were, in some way, mixed up with Judah and Benjamin, and with them returned from Babylon after the captivity.

38.—[*Spake* *of Him...to all, &c.*]It is worthy of remark, that this presentation of our Lord in the temple appears to have been the primary fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi iii. 1, “The Lord shall suddenly come to His temple.” It was indeed a sudden unostentatious coming. The only witnesses, apparently, were an old man and an old woman,—and the only attendants a poor woman and her equally poor husband, —and the form in which the Lord appeared was as a little infant in arms! How little we should have expected this! How many prophecies may be fulfilling around us at this very time! God’s ways are truly not as our ways.

39*.—*[*Returned into Galilee...to...Nazareth.*]Two important in­cidents in our Lord’s history come in here, which St. Luke passes over, not necessarily because he was ignorant of them, but simply because he was not inspired to write of them. Those incidents are the visit of the wise men from the East, and the flight into Egypt. Joseph and Mary appear to have returned to Bethlehem after the presentation in the temple, though it is quite possible that they may have gone to Nazareth for a short time. They, probably, returned to Bethlehem under a sense of duty, as if the Messiah ought to dwell in the place where it was prophesied He should be born. There, at Bethle­hem, they were visited by the wise men from the East. From thence, being supplied by their gifts with the means of journey­ing, they fled into Egypt, to escape the anger of Herod. From Egypt, after the death of Herod, they returned to Nazareth.

There are doubtless other views propounded on this some­what difficult subject. The one above stated appears to be by far the most reasonable, and to involve the fewest difficulties.

If Mary and Joseph had remained at Bethlehem till the visit of the wise men, and after their visit had gone up to Jerusalem, they would have been deliberately plunging into danger, by going to the place where Herod was.

If the presentation in the temple did not take place till after the visit of the wise men, and the reception of their gifts, it does not seem likely that Mary’s offering would only have been a pair of pigeons.