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My Utmost for His Highest

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Luke 1:22-38; Philippians 2:1-11; Philippians 1:20

For the last few weeks we have been talking about expectations. We see how our lives are filled with expectations - some are wonderful and give us encouragement to excel and accomplish tasks, and some are misplaced and can lead to worry and anxiety.

We spoke of broken expectations when life, friends, family, or careers do not measure up to one's expectations and how this can lead to personal struggles, self-doubt, deep bitterness, and a damaged view of life and relationships. Broken expectations can pose serious problems to life as we wish it could be.

Matt spoke about "the gap" between expectations and reality - how do we fill in this space between what we want and think will happen and what actually does happen? What will we do when we are faced with a response to our expectations? Will we turn to faith, hope, and trust in the promises of God, or do we allow ourselves to linger in the disappointments, frustrations, and broken expectations of life?

Sometimes we need to step back and look at the big picture and see the promises of God through the eyes of others, and through the lens of time. Sometimes it is only in looking back that we can clearly see God at work in our lives. We need to re-examine and reclaim God's promises. When we look at the promises of God, we see promises kept, promises fulfilled, and promises yet to be completed. Today we will look at a few more expectations and promises of God and ask the question "how will we respond?" How should we respond?

In Luke's gospel we read about the story of Simeon, a righteous man who waited patiently upon the promises of God; and Anna a prophetess, who prayed and fasted in the temple waiting upon the Lord.

Luke 2:22-38

22 When their time of purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, 23 (as is written in the law of the Lord, "Every first born male is to be consecrated to the Lord")²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the Temple courts. When the parents brought in the child to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace,

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 as a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel."

33 The child's mother and father marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and be a sign... that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she

had lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, and then a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at the very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

These are wonderful yet simple examples of faithfulness and promises kept.

Simeon's delight was to see the promised Messiah. He didn't see the child grow-up. He didn't see any of the miracles performed by Jesus. He didn't know the whole story or see the ending, but he believed and took God at his word. God promised Simeon he would live to see the Lord's Christ, the promised messiah, and that was enough. His desire was not fame or fortune but that salvation would come to Israel. Israel would have a way back to God. The world would come to God and God would be glorified.

Look at verses 34 & 35 - *This child is destined to cause the rise and fall of many in Israel. And a sign that will be spoken against, so that many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*

These words continue to ring true today. For over two thousand years following Jesus has led people to rise and fall in their expectations of life

- How has your faith in Jesus challenged you?
- Has your journey of faith been easy?
- Has your soul been pierced by the call of God upon your life?
- Have you felt the joy of the Lord and experienced His blessings?
- Have you been obedient to God's commands and His call to "come and follow me"?
- Have you waited faithfully and expectantly upon the promises of God?

Many wanted the Messiah to come and drive out the Romans and scatter their enemies. They wanted Israel to be restored to power and prominence in the world. They had great expectations of what God would do for them and for their nation; and yet there were those who desired to know God more and follow his commands and teachings. They had a different set of expectations. We too want God to solve all our problems and drive away the troubles of our lives. That does sound nice doesn't it? Yet is that always the best thing for us? Are some of our expectations misplaced? Are they realistic?

Anna was a prophetess living at the temple. She worshipped God day and night for 50-60 years - fasting and praying to God, and praying for her people. These faithful servants desired that others would come to know God. They prayed that people would come to salvation in God, and that Israel would be restored. They prayed that they might see God's glory.

We hold in tension the desire for the things of the world alongside the desire to know more of God and draw close to him. We struggle with the need to be obedient to God's calling on our lives - to love him and to love others, to look beyond ourselves while also feeling the need to satisfy our personal longings. Did you notice the words in verse 25: *"Simeon was righteous and devout, the Holy Spirit was upon him."*

The Holy Spirit does the work of God. We live in a time when the Holy Spirit is active and working in the lives of the people of God. Do you feel that the Holy Spirit is working in your life? We need to seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to be working in us to live faithful and obedient lives for the Lord. We can't do this on our own. We need to spend time before the Lord in prayer, meditation, and reflection.

Christ came and lived among us. He redeemed the world through his faithfulness and obedience to God the Father and his sacrifice of love for us and all of creation. God is reconciling the world through His Son, Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. He invites us to join him in this work. Anna was a humble woman who prayed and fasted day and night in the temple for over 50 years. These people humbled themselves before God and sought him. God revealed himself to Simeon and Anna - He blessed them. These promises of God were fulfilled in their lives and yet their lives were not glorious or free from problems. They were still under Roman rule. Simeon and Anna faced many problems in life but they believed and trusted in God.

We don't always see the promises of God fulfilled. We lack scriptural knowledge and don't know the promises of God, so we are not able to see the bigger picture - we don't think with the mind and attitude of Christ. That is where faith comes in, and the infilling of the Holy Spirit. This is not a blind faith but a faith based on promises fulfilled, lives transformed by God's love, and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We must hold in tension the promises of God, their fulfillment in time, and our understanding of God's purposes. We only see a portion of God's plan and we have limited knowledge of God's purposes.

When Christ returns we will see Him in His full glory, and our understanding will be made complete. But for now, we know only in part. Until that time, we hold in tension being made in the image of God - fallen, yet redeemed, saved, but not experiencing the fullness of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, yet caught in our human form, seeking the Holiness of God, yet tempted by half truths, and the things of the world. Scripture tells us we are to have the attitude of Christ and humble ourselves before Him.

Phillipians 2:1-11

1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness or compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love being one in spirit and purpose. 3 do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also into the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: 6 Who being very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being in human likeness. 8 and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death ... even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Jesus was fully God and fully human concealing his divinity under the veil of flesh Jesus emptied himself, he humbled himself and became a servant to all creation pouring himself out as savior and redeemer of the world. He was obedient to God the Father even to death.

J Vernon McGee a well-known preacher/teacher/evangelist reminds us that everything we have comes from God. The only thing we really can offer God is our obedience - our "free will". We return back to God what he freely gave us. Will we truly say to God "not my will, but your will be done"? God requests our obedience, not out of obligation but out of love and delight in Him.

Song – "Now That I've Held Him in My Arms" by Michael Card. (This can be watched on You Tube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBZiPRPogn0>.)

Many Jews expected a conquering Warrior/Messiah. God sent a little baby. In a culture of honor, pride, and power, Jesus chose humility, servant hood, and obedience - even the shameful death on a cross - not what we expected. We do not always get what we expect from our relationship with God, and God certainly does not always get what he expects from us. We have been given free will. What will we do during this New Year? How will we respond to God's call upon our life? Will we draw near to him and seek him as our savior and Lord?

One of my favorite devotionals is "My Utmost for His Highest." It has been one of the more popular daily devotionals of our time. It is a collection of teachings and writings by Oswald Chambers from the early 1900's. The entry for January 1 begins with a quote from Philippians 1:20....

Paul writes: "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death My Utmost for His Highest. My earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed." We will all feel very much ashamed if we do not yield to Jesus the areas of our lives He has asked us to yield to Him. It is as if Paul were saying, "My determined purpose is to be my utmost for His highest... my best for His glory." To reach that level of determination is a matter of the will, not of debate or of reasoning. It is absolute and irrevocable surrender of the will at that point. An undue amount of thought and consideration for ourselves is what keeps us from making that decision,

although we cover it up with the pretense that it is others we are considering. When we think seriously about what it will cost others if we obey the call of Jesus, we tell God ... He doesn't know what our obedience will mean. Keep to the point—He does know. Shut out every other thought and keep yourself before God in one thing only—my utmost for His highest. I am determined to be absolutely entirely for Him and Him alone.

This is our challenge for the New Year. Will we attempt to do our utmost for His highest? It is our greatest expectation that we will do nothing that we will be ashamed of before the Lord. Christ gave His all for us. Let us give our all for Him. May this be our prayer for one another and for the Church. Amen