

A Promise Takes Time

Most Christmas pageants focus on the principal characters of the nativity story—an innocent Mary, a bewildered Joseph, awestruck shepherds and a sleeping baby Jesus. Then we throw in nonbiblical extras, like the Little Drummer Boy, to spice things up. But I've yet to see a play or a movie of the Christmas story that includes Simeon and Anna, the two Jewish intercessors who prophesied over Jesus a few days after His birth.

This Christmas, I'm thinking more about Simeon and Anna—not because I've reached their age bracket yet, but because I have more appreciation for people who wait patiently for God's promises.

While most of Israel was clueless about God's plan of salvation, and angry about Roman occupation, Simeon knew Jesus was coming—and the Holy Spirit told him he wouldn't die until he saw the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be dedicated, Simeon took the boy in his arms and declared that He was the "light of revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32, NASB).

Then Anna walked into the scene. An 84-year-old widow, she had been praying and fasting continually in the temple, asking God to send the Savior. Like Simeon, she immediately recognized Jesus as the answer to her prayers and began telling everyone that their long wait was over.

It was a scene of jubilation. I imagine both Simeon and Anna held their hands in the air—and perhaps even shouted—as they welcomed the fulfillment of the ancient Messianic prophecies. But what we don't see in this happy scene are the decades of painful groaning that these old saints endured. The joyful moment of Jesus' birth did not come without a price.

God's promises, like the birth of children, require a

gestation period—an agonizing season of waiting. Most people in the Bible who claimed big promises did not get instant, microwave answers. Like the childless Hannah, or the heirless Abraham or the imprisoned apostle Paul, they travailed. And waited. And travailed some more.

In the animal kingdom, big creatures often have the longest gestation periods. A baby whale is in his mother's womb for 18 months, and a baby giraffe waits 15 months. Some species of elephants are pregnant for two years!

That tells me that if I am carrying a big promise, I should be prepared to wait.

I should understand this process, since I watched my wife give birth to all four of our children. How quickly we forget that prayer is often compared with childbirth in the Bible. And in this painful process, we must press through the darkness of doubt and lay hold of God's sure promise, especially when we feel like giving up.

Many of us are at the most intense stage of the birth process—the transition phase, in which a pregnant woman feels confused, irritable and restless. We endure similar feelings of desperation in our walk of faith. We ask ourselves, *Did God really promise me that?* Everything inside us wants to quit believing.

I am sure Simeon and Anna considered quitting during their years of prayer. The headlines in Jerusalem were depressing. The economy was awful. The political situation was demoralizing.

Yet these two faithful prayer warriors didn't go into retirement. They found the grace to press on. Though their hands grew feeble, their faith grew strong. They felt barren, but they shouted anyway.

And finally their groaning paid off—until they truly had

something to shout about. They not only witnessed the Christmas miracle; they also got to hold the baby Jesus in their arms.

As you enjoy Christmas with your family and friends, I pray the faith of Simeon and Anna will inspire you to hold tightly to all God has promised you.

J. Lee Grady was editor of *Charisma* for 11 years. He now serves as contributing editor while devoting more time to ministry. You can find him on the Web at www.jlee-grady.com. His latest book is *The Holy Spirit Is Not for Sale* (Chosen Books).