

God's Biggest Promises Take Time

Most Christmas movies or pageants focus on the principal characters of the nativity story—the innocent Mary, the bewildered Joseph, the awestruck shepherds and a sleeping baby Jesus. Then we throw in the non-biblical extras, like the cartoon donkey named Bo in the new movie *The Star*, which tells the story of Jesus' birth from the animals' point of view.

But I've yet to see a play or a film of the Christmas story that focuses on Simeon and Anna, the two Jewish intercessors who prophesied over Jesus a few days after His birth. That's the movie I want to see.

This Christmas I'm thinking more about Simeon and Anna—not because I've reached their age bracket but because Christmas is not really a story about mangers, donkeys and angels. Ultimately it is a story about how God fulfills His promises—even when those promised answers take a long time.

While most of Israel was clueless about God's plan of salvation and angry about the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, 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 the infant Jesus to the temple to be dedicated, Simeon took the boy in his arms and declared that He was the “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

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. She had sought God for years for the promised Savior. I am sure she was weary of waiting. Yet, like Simeon, she immediately recognized Jesus as the answer to her prayers and began telling everyone that their long wait was over.

Luke 2:38 says that when Anna saw the baby, “she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for the redemption of Israel.”

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 ancient 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, 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 grows 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 if I am carrying a big promise, I should be prepared to wait.

I should understand this uncomfortable 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 tedious 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 right now 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.

Perhaps they read the promise of Isaiah 62:1: "For the sake of Zion I will not keep silent, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest until her righteousness goes forth as brightness and her salvation as a lamp that burns."

They did not let the flame of prayer go out. They persevered. And finally, their groaning paid off—and they had something to shout about. They not only witnessed the Christmas miracle; they also got to hold the baby Jesus in their arms.

This Christmas, I pray the faith of Simeon and Anna will inspire you to hold tightly to all God has promised you. The promise came from Him. He is working quietly behind the scenes. Don't stop believing.