

John MacArthur

Anna, the aged evangelist

"Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem".

Luke 2:36-38 NKJV

A weary widow

Few people paid attention to Christ's birth, and fewer still were aware that He was the fulfillment of Israel's hope for Messiah. That spiritual insight was granted to just a small circle of faithful men and women, most of whom we know very little about. Anna is a particularly mysterious figure; she's only briefly mentioned in three verses of Luke's gospel. And while the details we're given are sparse, what little we do know about her sheds light on why God set her aside for such a significant blessing.

By the time of Jesus' birth, Anna was already advanced in years. She had not enjoyed a particularly easy life. Her whole world was shattered by tragedy when she was still quite young, apparently before she had even borne children. Her husband died seven years after their marriage, and she had remained single ever since.

The Greek text is ambiguous as to her exact age. It might mean literally that she had been a widow for eighty-four years. Assuming she married very young (remember, thirteen was a typical age for engagement in that society), then lived with her husband seven years before he died, that would make her at least 104 – very old indeed, but entirely possible.

More likely, what the text is saying is that she was now an eighty-four-year-old widow. She was married for seven years when her husband died, and having never remarried, she had now lived as a widow for more than six decades. Widowhood in that society was extremely difficult. It virtually guaranteed a life of extreme poverty. That's why, in the early church, the apostle Paul urged young widows to remarry (1 Tim. 5:14), so that the church was not overly burdened with their support.

Anna probably either lived on charity or supported herself out of the remnants of her family's inheritance. Either way, she must have led a very frugal, chaste, and sober life. Luke adds that she "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37) – which rounds out the picture of this elderly, dignified, quiet, devoted woman's life and ministry.

A sincere servant

Luke gave another significant detail about Anna: "[She] did not depart from the temple" (Luke 2:37). That's an emphatic statement, which suggests that Luke meant it in a literal sense. Evidently, Anna lived right there on the temple grounds. There were some apartments in the outer courts (Neh. 13:7-9). These were modest chambers, probably used as temporary dwelling places for priests who lived on the temple grounds while doing their two weeks' annual service.

Perhaps because of her long faithfulness, her obvious spiritual gifts, her steadfast devotion to the Lord, and her constant commitment to her ministry of prayer and fasting, temple officials had given her a small chamber. She was now too old to be employed as a caretaker, but perhaps she had once served in that capacity, and her living quarters had been given to her for life. In any case, it was ultimately the Lord who had graciously provided her a place in His house and sovereignly orchestrated whatever arrangement she might have had with the temple custodians.

It is obvious that Anna was a most extraordinary woman in the eyes of everyone who knew her. She lived the simplest kind of life. She could always be found at the temple. She was singularly and completely devoted to the service and worship of God – mostly through her prayers and fasting. The manner of her praying, accompanied by fasting, speaks of her own self-denial and sincerity. Fasting by itself is not a particularly useful exercise. Abstaining from food per se has no mystical effect on anything spiritual. But fasting with prayer reveals a heart so consumed with praying, and so eager to receive the blessing being sought, that the person simply has no interest in eating. That is when fasting has real value.

Anna apparently had been doing this as a pattern for sixty-four years or longer. Here was a passionate woman! What do you think Anna had been praying about? She surely prayed about many things, but there is little doubt that one of the main subjects of her prayers was an earnest plea for the very same thing Simeon was so eager for: “the Consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). Her hope, like Eve’s, was for the Seed who would crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15). Her longing, like Sarah’s (Gal. 3:8, 16), was for the Seed of Abraham, who would bless all the nations of the world. She was praying that God would soon send the promised Deliverer, the Messiah.

Anna’s amazing faith stemmed from the fact that she believed all the promises that filled the Old Testament. She took the Word of God seriously. She knew in her heart that the Messiah was coming, and without any doubt whatsoever her first and foremost prayer was that it would happen soon.

An enthusiastic eye-witness

I’m convinced that Anna had a remarkable knowledge of spiritual truth. Remember, she belonged to the believing remnant, not the apostate majority. She had no part in the error and hypocrisy that Jesus would later rebuke among the scribes and Pharisees. She was not a participant in the money-changing system at the temple that stirred His wrath. She knew the Pharisees were corrupt legalists. She understood that the Sadducees were spiritually bankrupt liberals. She truly loved her God. She understood His heart and mind. She genuinely believed His Word. She was a wonderfully remarkable woman indeed – perhaps one of the most devout people we meet anywhere on the pages of Scripture. No one else comes to mind who fasted and prayed faithfully for more than sixty years!

God was about to give her an answer to her prayers in the most dramatic fashion. Luke 2:38 says that just when Simeon pronounced his prophetic blessing on the infant Christ and His earthly parents, “in that instant”, she came along. Now, Herod’s temple was a massive building, and the temple complex was huge, surrounded by a courtyard with thousands of people milling around at almost any given time.

Joseph and Mary did not know Simeon, but by God’s providence and through the sovereign direction of His Spirit, He had brought them together (v. 27). At that very instant, just while Simeon was blessing the child with inspired words of prophecy, the Spirit of God providentially led this elderly woman to a place where she was within earshot. Luke’s description is typically understated: “Coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord” (v. 38).

Suddenly everything she had been praying and fasting for was right there in front of her face, wrapped in a little bundle in Simeon’s arms. By faith, she knew instantly that Simeon’s prophecy was true and that God had answered her prayers. She immediately began giving thanks to God, and all those many, many years of petition turned to praise. We can only imagine how Anna felt after long decades of focused prayer and fasting, yearning for God to reveal His glory again, praying and fasting for the salvation of Israel, and beseeching God to send the Messiah. Finally, the answer to her prayers had come in flesh and blood.

An extraordinary evangelist

Suddenly Anna’s prophetic giftedness came boldly to the forefront: “[She] spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). The verb tense signifies continuous action. It literally means that she continually spoke of Him to all who were looking for the Redeemer. This became her one message for the rest of her life.

Notice that Anna knew who the believing remnant were. She could identify the true worshippers, the ones who, like her, were expectantly awaiting the Messiah. She sought such people out, and at every opportunity from then on, she spoke to them about Him. That is how this dear woman who had spent so many years mostly talking to God became best known for talking to people about Christ. The Messiah had finally come, and Anna was one of the very first to know who He

was. She could not keep that news to herself. She thus became one of the very first and most enduring witnesses of Christ.

What became of Anna after this is not recorded. She was undoubtedly in heaven by the time Christ began his public ministry some thirty years later. The day of His dedication was probably her one and only glimpse of Him. But it was enough for her. She literally could not stop talking about Him. And that is the most endearing part of this wonderful woman's extraordinary legacy.

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