



Anna

HER NAME MEANS

“Favor” or “Grace”

HER CHARACTER: Married for only seven years, she spent the long years of her widowhood fasting and praying in the temple, abandoning herself entirely to God. A prophetess, she was one of the first to bear witness to Jesus.

HER SORROW: As a widow, she would probably have been among the most vulnerable members of society, with no one to provide for her financially or to take care of her if her health failed.

HER JOY: That her own eyes beheld the Messiah she had longed to see.

KEY SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:22–38

Monday

HER STORY

A small bird darted past the Court of the Gentiles, flew up to the Women’s Court, and then on to the Court of Israel (one of the inner courts of the temple, accessible only to Jewish men). Anna blinked as she watched the beating wings swerve into the sunlight and vanish. She wondered into which privileged corner of the temple the little bird had disappeared.

For most of her eighty-four years, she had been a widow who spent her days praying and fasting in the temple. Though Anna had

walked past the outer court thousands of times, she never failed to notice the warning inscribed in its walls in both Greek and Latin: “No stranger is to enter within the balustrade round the temple and enclosure. Whoever is caught will be responsible to himself for his death, which will ensue.” It was an awesome thing to come into the presence of the Holy One.

Though she could not echo the prayer of Jewish men, who praised God for creating them neither Gentiles nor women, she could at least be grateful for the privilege of ascending beyond the Court of the Gentiles to the Women’s Court, where she would be that much closer to the Most Holy Place. Having done so, she bowed her head, rocking back and forth to the rhythm of her prayers (Psalm 84:1–3):

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.

Suddenly a voice interrupted her recitation of the familiar psalm. Old Simeon, she saw, was holding a baby to his breast, pronouncing words that thrilled her soul: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Like her, Simeon had lived for nothing but Israel’s consolation. Though he had not seen, yet he had believed. Anna watched as the child’s parents hung on the old man’s words. Then he handed the infant back to his mother, this time speaking more softly: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Anna placed her arms gently around the young mother's shoulders and gazed at the sleeping infant. Words of thanksgiving spilled from her lips. Her heart felt buoyant, her hope unsinkable. More vividly than Jacob, who had dreamed of a ladder full of angels, or Moses, who had beheld a bush burning in the desert, she, Anna, a widow and prophetess from the tribe of Asher, had experienced the very presence of God. Her eyes had seen the promised child, whose brilliance would scatter the darkness and bring deliverance for all God's people.

Now she too felt like a sparrow soaring freely in the house of God. It no longer mattered that she was forbidden entry into the innermost courts of the temple. God himself was breaking down the dividing walls between Jew and Gentile, male and female, revealing himself to all who hungered for his presence. That day a child had transformed the Women's Court into the holiest place of all.

Scripture doesn't tell us whether Anna ever actually wished she were allowed to enter the innermost courts of the temple in Jerusalem. But her longing for God is obvious. Clearly, she was a woman with a great spiritual appetite, who abandoned her life to God and was rewarded by meeting Jesus and his parents just forty days after his birth, during the presentation in the temple.

THE TEMPLE COURTS

*T*he old woman Anna had probably spent upwards of sixty years in the temple. In fact, she never left it, “but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying” (Luke 2:37). The evidence of her devotion is not just in the fact that she spent all those years in prayer, but that she recognized the Christ. (He was, after all, only about six weeks old.) Yet even though Anna had relinquished a normal lifestyle, spent hours of every day in prayer, and gone without food as a sign of devotion, she was still not allowed access to the actual temple. Despite being relegated to the outer court for women, however, she never let that restriction squeeze her heart or strangle her love for God.

Solomon had built the first temple, an elaborate, white limestone structure, inlaid with gold. Zerubbabel built the second temple when the Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon. Herod the Great built the third temple, where Anna worshiped. He was a tireless builder, and the temple in Jerusalem was only one of his projects.

Herod’s temple had four successive courts, each more exclusive than the one before it. The outer court was known as the Court of the Gentiles. This was the only place where non-Jews were allowed. This court was also the place where Jesus later cleared the temple of those buying and selling. The inner court was divided into two sections: the Women’s Court, where Anna worshiped, and the Court of Israel. Both Jewish women and men could enter the Women’s Court, but only Jewish men were allowed into the Court of Israel. The Court of the Priests surrounded the actual temple building itself and was accessible only to those of the Levitical priesthood.

The customs of her time may have restricted the physical location of Anna’s worship, but no earthly regulation could bind her actual worship or devotion. Be an Anna! Don’t let anything limit your devotion to God! No earthly rules or restrictions. No past mistakes or sins. No life situations that you can’t overcome. Let nothing get in the way of worshiping your God and recognizing your Savior.

Read Luke 2:22–38.

1. Simeon “was waiting for the consolation of Israel” (verse 25). Anna knew there were others in the temple “who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (verse 38). These are references to the coming of the Messiah. What would it feel like to wait and hope like that for years and years?
2. What do Simeon’s words tell you about Jesus’ mission?
3. Why do you think so many people were hoping and praying for the Messiah? What does that say about how they viewed their lives?
4. Describe Anna’s lifestyle (verse 37). What aspects of it seem attractive or foreign to you?
5. What do you long for God to accomplish before you die? Or if you don’t long for anything, why do you suppose that’s the case?

*A*nna's life revolved around prayer and fasting in the temple. She evidently had no family, no home, no job. Instead, God was her family, the temple her home, and prayer her occupation. Though you may not have the freedom to spend every moment in prayer, as she did, you can be sure the time you do spend is never wasted. If you long to see your Savior, to experience his presence in your life, let Anna's devotion encourage you.

Promises in Scripture

Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you.

—JEREMIAH 7:23

*He has shown all you people what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.*

—MICAH 6:8

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

—ROMANS 12:10

HER LEGACY OF PRAYER

She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

—LUKE 2:37

- REFLECT ON:** Luke 2:36–38.
- PRAISE GOD:** That Jesus is the true Bread from heaven, who satisfies the hungry heart.
- OFFER THANKS:** For men and women who hunger and thirst for God's kingdom.
- CONFESS:** Any tendency to be so locked into your own concerns that you fail to pray for others in need.
- ASK GOD:** To increase your hunger for his kingdom.

Lift Your Heart

*A*nna did more than merely long for the coming Messiah; she prayed and fasted daily for the coming of God's kingdom. Even though Christianity has spread across the globe, there are still many people who suffer from war and injustice, many who have little or nothing to eat, and many more who live in spiritual darkness. This week stretch yourself beyond your immediate concerns. Look at an atlas, a map, or a globe, and choose a country for which to pray. Read newspaper reports and magazine articles that will help you understand what is going on in that nation. Fast and pray for peace, for daily bread, for freedom, for justice, and for Christ's light to shine upon that people.

Jesus, I long for your light to spread across the whole earth so that peoples from every land will know you. Today, give me a burden for another nation or ethnic group that knows little of you. Show me how to pray in a way that builds your kingdom.