The next event recorded in the life of Jesus is found in Luke 2:21-24. This passage is rich in meaning, once we understand the scriptural background of the rites of circumcision (of the son) and purification (of the mother).

Although Jesus was the Son of God, he was also a normal Jewish boy. As required by Scripture, he was circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3) and at that time was formally named Jesus, in obedience to the angel’s command (Matthew 1:21). This was the mark that he was part of a people who were in covenant with God.

Jesus was “born under law” (Galatians 4:4-5). He was born into a community governed by the Covenant of Sinai, and like every other person in this community, he was bound to all its social regulations and spiritual requirements of that covenant. This is important to understand, because contrary to popular belief, Jesus never contravened the Law of Moses. In fact, he was the only person on the face of the earth who was ever able to keep it fully and thus be declared righteous in his own right before God. Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Law of Moses in his own life before he superceded the Law of Moses on the Cross.

And so we see, right from his eighth day, he fulfilled the stipulations of the Law of Moses by being circumcised, the first step in a long road of meticulous adherence to the legal regulations of the Sinai Covenant. Why was Jesus circumcised? The answer is quite simple. To fulfill the Law (note Luke 2:23).

But in verse 22, we discover that one other legal requirement of the Law of Moses was fulfilled at the time when Jesus was circumcised. But this legal requirement now focused on Mary, his mother. Luke writes:

“When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.”

What “purification” was this? And why did Luke record it in his account?
Read Leviticus 12:2-4

The rite of purification for a mother, after the birth of a son, could only be performed after three distinct time periods, totaling 41 days:

- Seven days of ritual uncleanness
- Circumcision on the eighth day
- A further thirty-three days of ritual uncleanness

And so we see Mary going to the Temple “[w]hen the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed.” Assuming that Jesus was presented on the day immediately following the completion of Mary’s ritual uncleanness, he was probably 42 days old when he was presented at the Temple.

As required by the Torah (the Law of Moses), Mary presented two sacrifices – a burnt offering for her newborn son, and a sin offering for herself, as a sign that her ritual impurity was over. But look at what Luke records their offering to be in 2:24:

“[They went] to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’”

Now take another look at Leviticus 12:6:

“When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering.”

Do you notice the Law’s requirements are very specific. What offering is specified by the Torah? “A year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering.” But take a look at what Mary offered as a sacrifice – “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Yet Luke says this was “in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord.” This is because Leviticus 12:8 tells us:

“If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.”

God had made provision in his Law for the poor, and Joseph and Mary obviously fell into this category. They were too poor to buy a lamb for an offering, and so had recourse to the poor man’s substitute – “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

From this we see clearly that Jesus was not born into a wealthy family. Indeed, he was born into a poor family from an obscure rural village on the outskirts of the Roman empire. But this was all part of Christ’s total identification with humanity.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:9

When you think of all that Jesus left behind – the splendor of co-existence with the Father (John 17:5) – it makes the wonder of his Incarnation all the more amazing.