

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Christmas Broadcasts: Getting ready for Christmas (2000)

Only eight more days to Christmas! When I was a boy, we eagerly counted down the days, to Christmas. You could count in ordinary days or in shopping days. Then the number of shopping days was the smaller and made Christmas seem nearer! Today, sadly, as far as I am concerned, they're both the same.

In our house, we seem to have been getting ready for some time now. When we are on our summer holidays, my wife likes to keep an eye out for suitable presents. I have to admit that that's the least painful way of buying Christmas presents - if you can just see something suitable, though I rather begrudge the time spent in the shops. I'd much rather be outside in the fresh air!

However, it's just about all done now, thankfully, apart from some last minute purchases. How are you getting on with your preparations? Or are you one of those people who prefer to, or perhaps have to, leave everything till the last minute? Whether your preparation for Christmas takes you a few days, or weeks, or months that preparation fades into insignificance compared with the time God spent in getting ready for that first Christmas. Make no mistake about it - that first Christmas in Bethlehem didn't just happen. God had been getting ready for it for more than 4,000 years!

This morning, we're going to take a quick journey through the Bible to show what I mean by that statement.

The Garden of Eden

Our first stop is in the book of Genesis and, more particularly, in The Garden of Eden. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were put by God in the Garden of Eden and provided with everything they needed, physically and spiritually. Physically, they could enjoy the fruit of every tree in the garden except one. God had said, "Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Spiritually, they had the companionship of each other and, more importantly, of God, who came to them, "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (3:8).

Tempted by the Devil, who came to them in the form of a serpent, Eve, then Adam, disobeyed God and ate of the forbidden fruit. As a consequence, the judgement of God came upon the devil, upon Eve, and upon Adam. We'll read God's judgement on the devil: "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (3:14 and 15).

Satan seemed to have won the day, But instead, he fails under the judgement of God. The first part of that judgement was immediate, making the serpent the most loathsome part of the creation to mankind, as it still is today. The second part of that judgement is future but would surely follow as certainly as that first judgement had taken place. The Seed of the woman, the Lord Jesus, would mortally destroy Satan - bruise his head - although in doing so, He would suffer pain - His heel would be bruised.

Perhaps like me, you have been making something which doesn't turn out right, you'd much rather scrap it and start again. It's often much less trouble and much quicker in the end! Thank God, He didn't just get rid of Adam and Eve, and start again. No! There in the Garden of Eden, God promised a coming Deliverer from sin. In a very special way, as born of the virgin, Mary, the Lord Jesus Christ is the promised Seed of the woman - not the Seed of man!

There in the Garden of Eden, God began to get ready for that first Christmas which would take place in Bethlehem, more than 4,000 years later.

Mount Moriah

Our next stop is still in the book of Genesis, but on Mount Moriah. About 2,000 years have gone by. God was testing the faith of His servant, Abraham, by asking him to offer up his only son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. It was in Isaac that God had promised Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed. But how could this be if Isaac were to die?

Nevertheless, in total faith and obedience, Abraham set out with Isaac for the place of sacrifice, Mount Moriah. On the way, Isaac says to Abraham, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (22:7-8). Abraham's faith knew that God would have an immediate answer to Abraham's needs. But the words of Abraham surely have some prophetic character. Perhaps it was these same words which John the Baptist had in mind when, by the banks of the river Jordan, he pointed to the Lord Jesus and declared, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Another 1,300 years have rolled by. God has not forgotten His promises. His preparations for that first Christmas are still ongoing.

The prophet Isaiah

So we come to The prophet Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied some 700 years before Jesus was born. Through him, God renewed His promises of the coming Saviour. We'll read from chapter 9 of Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined...For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgement and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this" verses 2-7.

We do well to take some time to look at this remarkable prophecy in some detail. "A Child is born." God did not send His Son into this world as a grown up Man, a readymade Saviour. No! Jesus would be born into our world as we are. Growing up in it and experiencing it in all its ups and downs as we do, sin apart. Only in this way could He become not only our Saviour, but our High Priest, able fully to enter into the deepest feelings of our hearts (Hebrews 4:15).

"Unto us a Son is given" The accuracy of the words of Scripture is always remarkable. Yet not too surprising when we remember Paul's words to Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God literally "God-breathed." (2 Timothy 3:16) God's Son could be given but not born for He is the Son from eternity. So John writes of Him: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1 and 2).

"And the government will be upon His shoulder" You've probably seen pictures of the Greek god, Atlas, bowed down with the weight of the world carried on his shoulders. You will have noticed how Margaret Thatcher, and then Tony Blair, aged under their years in government, and that of one country! Little wonder! Who would want such a responsibility? But such is the power of God's coming Saviour that the government of all the world is light enough to be borne upon His shoulder (singular). Yet when the Lord Jesus wanted to demonstrate His power and concern for us who had gone astray, He said of the shepherd who went after the lost sheep, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders (plural), rejoicing" Luke 15:5). Then let's look at His names:

"Wonderful" The Oxford dictionary defines this word as "very remarkable or admirable". This was the name by which God made Himself known to Manoah and his wife, the parents of Samson Judges 3:8. The world would witness no more remarkable event, see no more wonderful person, than the coming of God's Son. Charles Wesley captures something of that wonder in his words: "*Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.*"

"Counsellor" So often in life we just don't know what to do; we need some advice, some counsel. Here is promised the One who would work "all things according to His own will" Ephesians 1:11. And He's there to counsel us each day.

"Mighty God" The One laid in Bethlehem's manger would be none other than the Mighty God. Christina Rossetti sums it up for us:

*Our God, heaven cannot hold Him,
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign;
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty,
Jesus Christ.*

“Everlasting Father” We speak of Marconi as the “father of radio”, in the sense that he brought radio into being. So in this name, the term “Father” is not to be confused with the fact that God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Rather, the name indicates that the One promised would be the originator of all things, who Himself had no origin. So John would write of Him, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3).

“Prince of Peace” Throughout the history of this world, there have been relatively few years when there has not been war in some part or other. How desperately this world longs for peace in this 21st. century - in Northern Ireland, in Palestine, in the Balkans, in Africa. It is true that in a day to come the Lord Jesus Christ will set up His kingdom of righteousness and peace. Of that time, the promise is “there will be no end”. But already today, He brings His reign of peace into the hearts of those who accept Him as their Saviour and Lord.

The prophet Micah

It's time to move on now in our journey through the Bible to the prophet Micah. Micah lived about the same time as Isaiah. Let's read God's promise through Micah: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).

Not only did God promise the kind of person who would come but He also chose the place where He would be born. Not in Jerusalem, although the Temple with all its priestly service would be there. Not in Rome, although that would then be the controlling centre of the world. But in Bethlehem, here called Bethlehem Ephrathah, after its earlier name of “Ephrath”, a village 5 miles south of Jerusalem, to distinguish it from the other Bethlehem, 6 miles north-west of Nazareth. God's promised Saviour would come to lowly Bethlehem, a village of shepherds and ordinary folk. But that was entirely in keeping with the lifestyle of that One, who when He came would say, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:20).

It's time to move on again. No further promises would come from God in the intervening 500-600 years. All those earlier promises were by no means forgotten and so we come, at last, to the birth of the Saviour.

Little wonder that Paul writes of that crowning event: “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem...” (Galatians 4:4). In the grace and patience of God, the fullness of the time had indeed come. The time was right for the Saviour to come - right in every way, morally, spiritually, politically and geographically.

The millennia that had gone by from that first sin of Adam and Eve only served to confirm the rightness of God's verdict: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The people of Israel were in such a sorry state that when, some thirty years after the birth of Jesus, John the Baptist appeared to prepare the way of the Lord with his solemn message, “Repent”, multitudes went down to him at the river Jordan, confessing their sins. The ordinary people came, as did the hardened soldiers and the wealthy tax collectors (Luke 3:2-18).

Spiritually, there were those who “looked for redemption in Jerusalem” as Anna found when she went out having seen the baby Jesus presented to Simeon in the Temple (Luke 2:38).

Politically the time was right. The Jews groaned under the harsh yoke of Rome and longed for a deliverer to set them free. The coming of the Saviour would indeed set them free, although not in the way they hoped. The Lord Jesus by His coming and His death at Calvary would set men and women free from the far greater tyranny of sin, free to be the kind of men and women God had meant them to be from those first days of Adam and Eve. So Jesus would promise “If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

But the time was right geographically, too. Never before had there been such a system of Roman roads spanning the then known world. Never before could the good news of the Gospel go forth as rapidly as it did in those early days following the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

The climax of all God's preparation down through the ages is seen there at Bethlehem that first Christmas. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). But Bethlehem would mark only the beginning of God's giving. That giving would later involve the giving of His Son on the cross of Calvary. Only in that way could the Lord Jesus be true to the name given Him, for the angel had said to Joseph, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). On Calvary's cross, Jesus bore God's judgement for our sins.

This Christmas time we all need to ask ourselves just what are we doing with the gift which God has been preparing for so long and in such love. In closing, let me read to you a poem which sums up what we have been thinking about.

He did not use a silvery box
Of paper green and red.
God laid His precious gift to men
Within a manger bed.

No silken cord was used to bind
The Gift sent from above.
'Twas wrapped in swaddling clothes and bound
In cords of tender love.

There was no evergreen to which
His precious Gift was tied.
Upon a bare tree on a hill
His Gift was hung...and died.

'Twas taken down from off the tree
And laid beneath the sod.
But death itself could not destroy
The mighty Gift of God.

With mighty hand He lifted Him
From out the stony grave.
Forevermore for every man
A living Gift He gave.

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