

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Christmas Series 2017: Christmas - Prophecy

Good morning and welcome to this morning's talk in which we will be looking at the prophecies connected with the Christmas story.

While we have prophecies connected specifically with the place, the means, the time and the reason, it is worth noting right at the outset that the whole of the Old Testament is, in a way, a foretelling of the event that was to happen in Bethlehem which would change the whole of history and affect every person who has ever lived and all those yet to do so.

It is also worth reminding ourselves what the term "prophecy" means. In the Bible, it is most often used as "foretelling" of events that were going to happen. God used prophets to speak His mind on these events as He directed them accordingly. It was not always events being foretold that are referred to in this way. It also included things that God wanted to communicate to His own people or indeed to the nations at large. In the New Testament, the term more often referred to has a slightly different root word which means "to speak forth". In this sense, a prophet could therefore be described as a spokesman of God. Another way of thinking of a prophecy is "that which cannot be known by natural means". So, as we celebrate another Christmas let us remember that it was not just a story of a poor mother and father seeking somewhere for their child to be born. It was the fulfilment of promises that God had made to many people over many years. Indeed, in Revelation the Apostle John finishes Revelation 19:10 by saying "*for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*" So, putting this the other way around, we can say the spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus. Much of biblical prophecy is therefore occupied with the man named Jesus who was the Messiah, God's chosen King.

The word "Christmas" does not appear in Scripture but the dictionary meaning of it is "an annual festival, a mass in memory of the birth of Christ". The date of this is set every year as the 25 December, but this date is also not referred to in Scripture. What we do get in Scripture, however, in Galatians 4:4 is "*when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son...*" We see from this that the timing was not just random, it was part of a plan. That plan used a decree going out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed so each person had to return to their town of origin for a census to be conducted (see Luke 2:1-3). Joseph, the Lord's earthly father, was of the house and lineage of King David so he would need to go to Bethlehem in Judea. Our God does not just work behind the scenes, He often moves and changes the scenes that He is behind.

So, why Bethlehem? Why in Judea? If we consider the place and means of the Lord's birth in prophecy perhaps the best places to look would be in the books of Isaiah and Micah. However, before we do, let us remind ourselves of some of the history of God's earthly people, the children of Israel. After the death of King Solomon (see 1 Kings 11:41-43), David's son, there was great difficulty between his son and heir, Rehoboam, and a man named Jeroboam. Such was the difficulty that the kingdom ended up being split in two. Ten of the tribes were loyal to Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:16) and were called Israel. They took the northern end of the land and their capital became Samaria. The southern part remained true to Rehoboam and were called Judah. They were only two tribes, Judah and Benjamin. Their capital city remained Jerusalem. This division took place somewhere around 930 BC. In 721 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and scattered. Then around 130 years later the kingdom of Judah was taken by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, beginning 70 years of captivity.

It is important to note that although the northern kingdom was far bigger in geographic size and population, it was the kingdom of Judah that retained most of the focus of Jehovah since the royal line, from King David to Christ the Messiah, was to come through Judah. In Revelation 5:5 we see Christ, in a day still yet to come, referred to as "*the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.*"

In the Old Testament, we have the writings of sixteen prophets. This amounts to seventeen books, as Jeremiah wrote both the book that bears his name as well as Lamentations. Other prophets are referred to such as Elijah and Elisha but we do not have any of their writings recorded in Scripture. These prophetic books are usually referred to as they appear in the order of Scripture, that is three major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Daniel and then twelve minor prophets. Given what I have just said about the focus of Jehovah being on the two southern but smaller tribes, it will come as no surprise to learn that only three of these prophets were to the northern kingdom. These are Amos,

Jonah and Hosea. The two prophets who are the most specific about the Incarnation are Isaiah and Micah and they were contemporary with each other although, it would appear, that Micah prophesied slightly later. They also share many of the same general themes.

I would therefore like to talk about some of the things that Isaiah and Micah said in terms of the means and the place of the Lord's birth. We will then look at the New Testament statements in respect of the reason for the Lord's birth.

Let us start with Isaiah. It is worth noting that Isaiah means "Salvation of the LORD". How apt that he is often referred to as the "evangelist of the Old Testament". Right away in Isaiah 1, the LORD tells His people through His prophet that He has had enough of their sacrifices and offerings when it was making no impact on the way they were living their lives. In Isaiah 1:18, Isaiah reaches the wonderful invitation from God that although their sins were like scarlet or red like crimson, the LORD would reason together with them so those sins can become white like snow. So, the platform is laid for Isaiah to make the wonderful prophecies that he was about to make about the One who was going to come to bring man and God back together and for the sin question to be addressed.

Isaiah is best known perhaps for his declarations about how the Lord would be born and the names and responsibilities that he would take in a day yet to come. His book can be divided into four sections.

1. Isaiah 1-12 detail prophecies concerning Judah: her present condition and imminent judgement, and the coming of the Messiah and the ultimate restoration of the kingdom.
2. The second section can be looked at in Isaiah 13-35 and looks at the judgements that will be directed against Israel's enemies.
3. When we get to Isaiah 36-39, we have a historical interlude.
4. The final section is Isaiah 40-66 where we see, not the failures of the people or the judgements of their enemies, but rather the greatness of God and the deliverance and restoration of His people. This restoration is not just the one that we now know has already come to fruition some one hundred years after Isaiah prophesied, but the far longer ranging restoration of the children of Israel in a day yet to come.

Our first and perhaps most amazing and undeniable of Isaiah's "Christmas" prophecies comes in Isaiah 7:14 when he tells the people that the LORD will give them a sign, and that is that the *"virgin shall conceive and bear a Son."* The One that was to be born to deal with the sinful nature that we have all inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, could not have any part whatsoever in that sinful nature. So, while born of a woman, it was not by natural means. As the Lord grew up and lived His life in this world, not only did He not sin, but He could not have sinned as sin was not present within His being in any way, shape or form. This wonderful message was given to Isaiah so long ago and he had the privilege, and responsibility, of conveying this to the people of that day.

In the New Testament Paul, Peter and John all reinforce the practical outworking of this in their writings. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:22, *"Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth."* In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul tells us a remarkable thing, *"For He [that is God] made Him [that is Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"*. The only man of whom this could ever be said was made the very thing that was completely foreign to Him so that the wrath of God against sin could be poured out on Him. The result of this means that we who believe on Him and repent of our sins can be made *"the righteousness of God"*! We are then viewed not as sinners but as Christ is viewed in the eyes of God and we will never have to answer to God for our sin. The Apostle John in his epistles tells us about the advocacy of Christ who stands before a holy and righteous God to plead for us when and if we do slip up and fall into sin. John also completes this wonderful trilogy of truths in 1 John 3:5 by saying, *"And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin."* The only man of whom it could ever be said committed no sin, knew no sin and in Him was no sin found was only able to be so because He was born not by natural means but (as the angel of the Lord puts it to Joseph in Matthew 1:20), *"for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit."*

Perhaps it helps us to remember these three aspects by thinking of Peter as the man who was always active and keen to be doing things as the one who tells us that the Lord **did** no sin. Then Paul, the academic, the thinker and the highly educated one, tells us that the Lord **knew** no sin. Finally, John, the one who leaned on the Lord during supper and always referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved, he was close to the Lord's heart and he tells us that sin was **not found** in the Lord.

Before we leave this section, I would like to mention that while we as Christians are seen in the holiness and righteousness of our wonderful sinless Saviour and that He represents us before God when we do sin, we should never use this as an excuse or license to just live as we please. The Apostle Paul asks the question in Romans 6:1, *"Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?"* He has just reminded the believers in Romans 5:1 that they are justified by faith in Christ alone and that they have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. He has explained that through this one perfect sacrifice we can be saved and that *"where sin abounded, grace did much more abound"* (Romans 5:20). This is still the simple message of the Gospel and what the birth of Christ was eternally planned to

bring about. So, if anybody is listening today who feels burdened by sin and knows nothing of this wonderful peace with God, then let me invite you today to put your faith and trust in Christ, confess and turn away from your sin and you will be blessed by God in this wonderful way.

To go back then to Paul's question, he answers with a very emphatic "*Certainly not*". He exclaims in Romans 6:2, "*How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*" As believers then we should always be challenging ourselves as to whether we are living in a condition that is in line with the position into which we have been brought.

Going back, then, to Isaiah's prophecy of how Christ would be born, how beautiful it is to see this backed up in the Gospels so many years later. Then in Isaiah 9:6, Isaiah makes this great statement, "*For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given*". He goes on to tell of the names, titles and responsibilities the Lord will take up in a day still future when He sets up his kingdom in the millennium. The Lord will sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem and this poor, sad world will be brought into line under the perfect reign of the One whom Isaiah tells us will be called "*Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace*" (Isaiah 9:6-7) Later in his prophecy, in Isaiah 40:3, he tells us about the one who would be born to announce the imminent birth and work of the Lord, that is John the Baptist. Isaiah then goes on to tell us in some graphic detail of the sufferings that the Lord would endure at Calvary's cross where He becomes that great sacrifice for sin. Chapter 53 should always bring from the heart of all Christian believers a deep sense of appreciation and thankfulness for all that the Lord has accomplished on our behalf and should therefore bring from us true worship.

In Micah, we get a very clear prophecy of the place of the Lord's birth. I mentioned earlier that Joseph having to travel to Bethlehem was not merely something that was required by the ruler of the day; it was a Divine appointment set many centuries before. In Micah 5:2 we read, "*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 are from old, from everlasting.*" It was very clear for anyone who was looking for the Messiah, where and how He was to be born. We read in the second chapter of Luke's gospel of two such people who were very sure and rejoiced when they saw the baby Jesus. Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna (Luke 2:36-38) were waiting for the coming of the Messiah and no doubt would have been aware of the prophecies that we have been thinking about. When they saw Him, they were filled with joy and told others. Like them we too should be aware of the promises made that Christ will come again and be watching and waiting for that. The prophecies of His first coming made a difference in the day to day lives of Simeon and Anna. What difference then does the promise of His second coming make in ours? Although not our subject for today, it is worth keeping in mind that all the prophecies made of old have already been fulfilled that need to happen before Christ comes into the air and calls every believer to be with Him forever. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Paul tells us, "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord*". Then Paul instructs us in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 that we should comfort each other with these words. That great hymn of comfort, "When peace like a river", by Horatio G Spafford (1828-1888), includes that wonderful line,

"The sky, not the grave is our goal."

Surely this should have an impact on our lives as we face the challenges and uncertainties of each day.

So, why Bethlehem? Micah 5:2 refers to it as "*Bethlehem Ephrathah*" but it is also referred to as Bethlehem Judah (1 Samuel 17:12). We first read of it in connection with the death and burial of Rachel, Jacob's wife (see Genesis 35:16-20). There is no doubt that first mentions in Scripture are significant and I feel this one is no different. Jacob's name was changed to Israel (see Genesis 32:22-32) and his offspring became the chosen people of God in the Old Testament. It seems appropriate, then, that the place where Jacob buried his wife is the very place from where the Messiah should come. The life story of Ruth is also connected with Bethlehem (see Ruth 1:1-2, 1:19-22, 2:4 and 4:11) and then we read about Jesse the Bethlehemite (1 Samuel 16:1). This was the man whom Samuel was told by Jehovah to visit to choose the next King of Israel once it had been decided that Saul's reign was to be ended (1 Samuel 16:1). After he met the older, stronger and athletic soldier sons of Jesse (see 1 Samuel 16:6-10), he was then instructed by God that the youngest son, who had to be brought from the field where he was tending his father's sheep, was to be the next King (1 Samuel 16:11-12).

So, we can assume that David was born in Bethlehem and therefore we read again in Luke's Gospel that Bethlehem is the "*city of David*" (Luke 2:11). We are all very familiar with the Christmas carol "Once in Royal David's city" so we need to remember as we sing it this year that this was no coincidence. We can also enjoy the significance of what the name Bethlehem means, that is "the house of bread".

How wonderful that the Man who was to be known as the "*living bread*" (John 6:51) was to come into this world as a baby in a place known as this. We often sang as children

*"I am feeding on the living bread,
I am drinking at the fountain head"*

(Anon)

This is something that we should never forget. If we feed on this bread we will never be anything other than fully satisfied.

A final historic fact about Bethlehem. It would seem it is now identified with Beit Lahm which is located six miles south of Jerusalem and sits on a narrow ridge which runs from the central range. It is here that an enormous collection of buildings is referred to as the "Church of the Nativity". Of the 5,000 or so inhabitants, almost all would be considered Christians.

So, we have seen the Divine plan behind the Christmas story and how God has revealed these things to His people of old and preserved them for us in His Word. May we therefore marvel at them and lift our hearts in thankfulness and gratitude to our wonderful God who drew the plan of salvation and brought us into His great blessing.

May God's richest blessing be on you as you have listened this morning.

Thank you for listening and have a great Christmas.

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