

UNPREPARED FOR THE COMING OF CHRIST

How soon is too soon to start preparing for Christmas? It depends on **who you ask**, right? Some people wait until after Thanksgiving—when the clock strikes midnight—and it “officially” becomes “Black Friday.” Others **skip Thanksgiving altogether** and simply exchange their **Halloween** lawn decorations for **Christmas** decorations! And still others—like me—wait until **December 1st**! I’m pretty sure I shared with you once before how I subjected myself to the literally “shocking experience” of hanging up Christmas lights in the rain one December 1st while living in Lake Mills!

And...as most of you know, preparations for Christmas are well under way here at church! We had our trees up last Sunday (December 1st), I’ve been working with our young people in preparation for our Christmas program for a month or so, and this afternoon we will be getting tracts and candy ready for the Christmas parade this coming Saturday! So...with Christmas on the mind, I didn’t think it would be **too early** to start gearing the messages toward that very important and special celebration.

While praying about which passages to preach on, I decided to read the account of Jesus’ birth in each of the four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of the four is quite different—much more than I initially realized. Here—in my mind—are some interesting differences.

- 1) **Mary and Joseph** are mentioned in connection with Jesus’ birth in Matthew & Luke, but not Mark or John.
- 2) We can understand **why** that is true in the **book of John** because John emphasizes **the deity**—the “divineness”—of Jesus, not His **humanity**.
- 3) **Mark** doesn’t emphasize either the **humanity—or deity**—of Jesus at the beginning of his book. In fact, Mark does not refer to the **physical birth** of Jesus at all! What’s even **more interesting**—to me, anyway—is that Mark begins his book by **emphasizing the coming** of someone other than Jesus! Anyone know who that “**other someone**” is? John the Baptist!

So why is it that Mark opened his book emphasizing the **coming of John the Baptist** more than Jesus?

First, it is important to remember this: **Mark**—on his own—**did not decide** what to write! **God led Mark** to write what he wrote!

Second, Mark was not **the only one** who wrote about John the Baptist—God also led **John and Luke** to do the same. In fact, Luke chapter 1 has roughly **54 verses** about John the Baptist and his parents!

Let that sink in for a minute. God led Mark...and Luke...and John to write **more about John** the Baptist than they wrote about Mary and Joseph! **Why** is that? **Why** does God put so much emphasis on John the Baptist’s connection with the birth of Jesus? That is the question we are going to be looking at this morning.

Please take your Bibles and turn to Isaiah 40; follow along as I read verses 1-8.

Notice first... **1. The prophetic pronouncement of a manifestation of God**

Just to refresh your memory, it is technically **incorrect** to say God “predicts” things. God **doesn’t predict** that something **might** happen in the future—He proclaims it **will happen** because He **makes it** happen! We call it “prophecy.” So a “prophetic pronouncement” is a declaration of what God says will happen in the future. Before we look at what Isaiah says is going to happen, let’s consider...

A. The purpose for Isaiah’s prophecy

Notice how God had Isaiah start the chapter: “**Comfort ye, comfort ye** my people, saith your God. **Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem**, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished....”

Why does God want Isaiah to give a **message of comfort** to His people? Because Isaiah had just gotten done giving them a **not-so-comforting message**! What was that message? Look back at chapter 39:5-7. Pretty ominous message, isn’t it? ‘All that you have—including your children—will be taken to Babylon!’ **Why** were God’s people going to be “carted off” to Babylon? Because they had forsaken God!

So **the purpose** behind the message that God gives Isaiah to proclaim is to **comfort** His people—even though they were facing upcoming devastation—and deportation—to the land of Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar! What would comfort them? B. The promise in Isaiah's prophecy

What is the promise that Isaiah proclaimed would comfort God's people? In a nutshell, it is this: **God is coming** to rescue you! In other words, you **will not stay in captivity**—and away from your homeland—forever! **God will bring you back!** His glory shall be revealed; He will **manifest**—meaning show—Himself! --Look at vs 3. Notice it says, “make straight in the desert a high-way **for our God.**” --Now vs 5. “And the **glory of the LORD shall be revealed**, and all flesh **shall see it** together...” --Vs 9. Notice what it says at the end of the verse: “...say unto the cities of Judah, **Behold your God!**” --Now vs 10. God is going to come in strength; His arm “shall rule for Him...” --In vs 11—instead of the power and strength of God as seen in vs 10—we see the **tenderness** of God as He cares for His people.

C. The power behind the promise

Keep in mind the big picture. God's people are going to go into captivity because of their sin—but Isaiah is to preach a **message of comfort** because God is going to come and rescue them. But how **could they be sure** it was going to happen? Because of the One who does the promising!

The fulfillment of the promise wasn't dependent on the **power of man!** How do we know? Because in vs 6, God declares through Isaiah that “all flesh”—meaning mankind—“is as grass!” How **strong** is grass? Do you **build anything** with grass and flowers? You don't, do you? Not if you want it to last, anyway!

God reinforces the truth of the **weakness of men** in vss 7-8 when He says, “the grass withereth and the flower fadeth.” But the power behind the promise wasn't **the strength of men**—it was dependent on God!

They could count on it happening because God said it would happen! We see that in the end of vs 5 “for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it” and in the end of vs 8 “but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”

God's Word **will come** to pass! God **will bring about** the rescue that He has promised!

--Did God **rescue His people** from Babylon? Yes; He did!

--Did God **bring them back** to the city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah? Yes; He did!

God raised up King Cyrus who led the Medes and Persians to defeat the nation of Babylon. And after defeating Babylon, Cyrus let God's people return back to their homeland.

There is **another prophecy** that God used Isaiah to pronounce, and it is this:

2. The prophetic pronouncement of a messenger of God

God didn't **just** promise that **He would come**—God also promised that He would **send a messenger** before Him to **announce** His coming!

In vs 3 we have... A. The promised messenger

Notice what it says: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness...”

There will be a herald...a forerunner...a “crier in the wilderness” that will come with a message.

In vs 6, we again have a reference to a “crier.” “The voice”—a reference, I believe, to God—says “Cry.” The crier—Isaiah—in turn asks, “What shall I cry?” In other words, **what is my message?**

B. The pronounced message

What is the message of this messenger? To a certain degree, we already looked at the message: **God is coming to rescue you!**

--We saw that in vs 3. “Prepare ye the way of the LORD...make straight in the desert a high-way **for our God.**”

--We saw it in vs 5. “And the **glory of the LORD shall be revealed**, and all flesh **shall see it** together...”

--And we saw it at the end of vs 9. “...say unto the cities of Judah, **Behold your God!**”

But it wasn't just an announcement that **God was coming**—it was an announcement to **get ready** for His coming! Commentators tell us that the **imagery here** is of ancient kings in the east. When they traveled through the desert, a large group would go ahead of them and “prepare the way.” They would fill in the low places...and knock down some of the high places...and straighten out some of the crooked places as stated in verses 3 and 4.

Was there this kind of “crier in the wilderness”—a herald—to prepare God’s people before they **left Babylon** and went back to Jerusalem?

Not that we know of...at least not the kind of herald that told the people to get **the physical roads** ready. But...there was a well-known prophet who told the people to get **their hearts ready** for their return to Jerusalem! **Who was that?** The prophet Daniel!

Daniel 9:2-3, 5 “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem. ³ And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes: ⁵ We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments:”

But Isaiah’s prophecy is about more than God rescuing His people **from Babylon**.

3. The prophecy of Isaiah is also about Jesus and John!

Why do I make such a claim? After all, **Jesus’ name** is not mentioned in this passage—and neither is **John the Baptist’s!** But we know it is about Jesus and John because the New Testament plainly declares that...

A. The messenger is John

John 1:19-20, 23 “And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, **I am not** the Christ. ²³He said, **I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness**, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias [Isaiah].”

Can’t **get any plainer** than that, can it? ‘I am the messenger that Isaiah wrote about!’ We see the same thing in Mark 1:3-8, Luke 1:76, and Luke 3:2-6.

And since John is the messenger... B. The message is about the coming of Jesus!

Let’s go back through some of these verses and look at them through the lens of John and Jesus, keeping in mind there are three parts to the message.

1) Who is coming? Vs 3 says “the LORD”—all caps—meaning Jehovah God; God Almighty!

--Vs 5. “And the **glory of the LORD shall be revealed**, and all flesh **shall see it** together...”

Sounds to me a lot like **John 1:14** “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and **we beheld His glory**, the glory of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” Those who got to physically see Jesus on earth were looking at the glory of the Father!

--Now vs 9. From the city of Zion—the city of Jerusalem—there would come “good tidings” that they were to proclaim. What were the “good tidings?” “**Behold your God!**”

God is coming—in the person of Jesus! **Matthew 1:23** “... and they shall call His name **Emmanuel**, which being interpreted is, God with us.”

2) Why is He coming?

--Look at vs 10. Did Jesus come with a strong hand—and rule with an arm of strength?

No—but He will when He comes again!

Revelation 1:7 “Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him. Even so, Amen.”

--Noe vs 11. Did Jesus feed His flock like a shepherd when He came the first time? He sure did! But He did more than that! He called Himself the great shepherd that would **lay down His life for the sheep!**

Did Jesus gather “lambs”—little children—into His arms? He did, didn’t He?

Mark 10:13-14 “And they brought **young children to Him, that He should touch them**: and His disciples rebuked those that brought them. ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw it, He was much displeased, and said unto them, **Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not**: for of such is the kingdom of God.”

3) Get ready because He is coming! Did John the Baptist announce the coming of Jesus? Yes, he did!

--Did he tell people they **needed** to get ready? Yes, he did!

--**How** were they to get ready? Were they to build literal roads...and fill in the low places...and knock down the high places so it would be **easier for Jesus to walk** from town to town? No; that’s not how John told them to get ready! In order to see John’s message, we need to turn now to the New Testament.

Please turn to Matthew 3 where we have... **4. The preaching of John about Jesus in the New Testament**
Matthew 3; please follow along as I read verses 1-6.

A. What was John's message?

In a word: **repent!** We see that in vs 1-2...and vs 8.

--And we see it again in vs 11 -- "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance..."

--**What does it mean** to repent? It means to **change your mind** about something—and **change your direction** because you have changed your mind!

--**What were they** to change their mind about? John mentions two things in particular in his message.

1) He mentions judgment. Middle of vs 7 "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee **from the wrath to come?**" Middle of vs 10 "...therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and **cast into the fire.**" End of vs 12 "...but He will **burn up** the chaff with **unquenchable fire.**"

2) He mentions the confession of sins. Notice what it says in vs 5 and 6.

And in vs 8, John says they were to "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance." In other words, demonstrate proof that you no longer desire to sin!

A question that **could** come up—and **should** come up—regarding John's message is this:

B. What was the significance of baptism in John's preaching?

In other words, what is the correlation between "baptism" and "confession of sins" as we just read about in verses 5 and 6? Is John saying the **water of baptism** washes away sins? No; he's not!

In vs 11, John himself refers to it as a "baptism of repentance." It is a baptism that **demonstrates repentance**—and a desire for cleansing from sin. If it was a baptism that literally washed away sin, it would be called a "baptism of salvation"—not "repentance."

Notice what Paul says about it in **Acts 19:4** "Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the **baptism of repentance**, saying unto the people, that they **should believe on Him** which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." In other words, John's baptism **was not enough**—you still need to believe on Jesus! If John's baptism could wash away sins, you wouldn't need to do anything else afterward!

Lastly, let's consider... **5. The prophecy of Isaiah should have prepared people for the coming of Jesus**

Let's think this through a little bit. Isaiah was written 700 years before Jesus came to earth.

--Did the Jewish people know about the **prophecy of Isaiah** and the coming of the Messiah?

My guess is that **most of them did** because it was taught—weekly—in the synagogues.

--Did the Jewish people know about the **birth of John** the Baptist when it occurred?

Probably **not very many**—other than those who knew John's parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth.

The point I'm making is this—the Jewish people may have been **slow to believe Jesus had come** because they hadn't **heard about the messenger** that had announced His coming! In other words, they didn't "connect the dots" because they didn't **have** all the dots!

And that—to me—is one of the reasons God had Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all write about John the Baptist! Even if the Jewish people didn't recognize that their Messiah had come **while He** was on earth, they should have realized it after the fact!

They had the prophecy that God was coming...and that a messenger would come first...and that they needed to be ready! And John came, announcing that Jesus had come, and that they needed to repent! And then God had all four Gospel writers "spell it out" to them. And because they had a written record of fulfilled prophecy, they were without excuse and should believe it!

You see the correlation between then and now, right? We have **a written record**—from God through men—that demonstrates that everything that was supposed to happen regarding the coming of Jesus did happen! And just like they should have been able to "connect the dots" and realize who Jesus was, we should be able to "connect the dots" and realize who Jesus was—and still is!

Who is Jesus? Emmanuel—God with us!
Why did Jesus come? To save us from the penalty of our sins.
How did Jesus do that? By dying in our place.
What must **we do** to be saved?

First, we need **to repent**; we need to change our mind—and our direction!

What do we need to change our mind **about**?

1) First, we need to change our mind **about sin!** Sin—any sin—disqualifies us from heaven!

James 2:10 “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”

2) Second, we need to change our mind about how to **get rid of our sin!**

Sin keeps us out of heaven—and we cannot get rid of our sin!

--Water doesn't wash it away!

--And good works don't “weigh” it away! In other words, there is no scale in heaven to determine which you have more of—good works or bad works!

So to be saved, we need to agree with God that our sin keeps us out of heaven—and that we can't get rid of it.
That's the bad news!

The good news? As already mentioned, Jesus died in our place—but we have to **receive** Him!

When Jesus came the first time, **John 1:11** reminds us that “He came unto His own, and His own received Him not.” That was true then—and it is still true now!

But then there is the wonderful promise of **John 1:12** “But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them gave He power [authority, the right] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name:”

What about you? Have you received Christ? Everyone of us will meet Him some day!

--Don't just be prepared for Christmas—be prepared to meet Christ!

So what is it that God would have us do with what we've heard this morning?

Please take your hymnals and turn to page 498; “Whiter than Snow.”

This song reminds us of a very important Biblical truth—Jesus is the only One who can wash us and make us fit for heaven!

1. If you're here this morning and are not saved, Jesus wants you to come to Him for cleansing...and forgiveness and salvation. What happens when you do that? He cleanses you...and forgives you...and saves you. The fourth stanza reminds us “To those who have sought Him, Thou never saidst “No!”

2. This song also reminds us that God wants us to live for Him. Stanza 2 “Lord Jesus, look down from Thy throne in the skies, and help me to make a complete sacrifice.”

--That's what God desires—and that is what God deserves!