

Prepare The Way

One fact that's sometimes overlooked when people think about the Christmas story is that Jesus didn't simply appear out of nowhere. God spent thousands of years preparing the way for the appearance of His Son! It's true that John the Baptist played a role, but God was at work long before he was born.

What I'd like to do in this lesson is take some time to explore the different ways God prepared the way for the appearance of His Son. It's amazing to step back and realize how much effort He put into making sure that when His Son appeared, people would recognize him as the Messiah. Those who reject Him have no excuse.

Messianic Prophecies

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, the Lord told them that one day things would change. He promised that one day someone would come and crush the head of the serpent:

Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

This was the first Messianic prophecy. It's true that it didn't reveal very much. God didn't say who the Messiah would be, how He would accomplish His mission, or when He would appear. All Adam and Eve were told was that deliverance was coming.

As time went on the Lord revealed more about the Messiah who would one day save the world. God told mankind that:

- He would be a descendent of Abraham (Genesis 22:18)
- He would be born from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10)
- He would be a son of David (Jeremiah 23:5-6)
- He would be both God and Man (Isaiah 9:6-7)
- He would live for all of eternity (1 Chronicles 17:10-14)
- He would be the Good Shepherd (Zechariah 13:7)
- He would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14)
- He would be preceded by a herald (Malachi 3:1)
- He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)
- He would be a king (Genesis 49:10), a priest (Psalm 110:4), and a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15)
- He would be rejected (Isaiah 53:3)
- He would be sold for 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12-13)
- He would suffer (Isaiah 52:13-14)
- He would be condemned to death (Isaiah 53:7-8)
- He would die (Psalm 16:9-10)
- He would die for the sins of others (Isaiah 53:5)
- After He died, Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed (Daniel 9:26)
- He would be buried in a rich man's tomb (Isaiah 53:9)
- He would be resurrected (Psalm 16:10)
- He would justify all those who believed on Him (Isaiah 53:11-12)
- He would bring salvation to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6)

As you can see, the Messiah wasn't some sort of mystery man who suddenly appeared on the world stage. God gave His people a *tremendous* amount of information about Him!

Who was He? He was the Son of God – fully God and yet fully man as well. Where would He come from? He would be born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem. What would He do? He would suffer and die for the sins of mankind, and then be raised back to life again. He would bring salvation to all who believed – including the Gentiles.

All of these things were revealed centuries *before* Christ was born in Bethlehem. The people of His day had no excuse for not recognizing Him. Jesus fulfilled all of the prophecies concerning Him, and He was exactly who God said He would be. His life, ministry, and death shouldn't have come as a surprise. After all, God told them in advance what was going to happen – and He told them in great detail.

The Time Of His Appearing

Not only did God tell Israel what the Messiah was going to be like, He also told them *when* the Messiah was going to appear. This is what the angel Gabriel told Daniel:

Daniel 9:25-26: “Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself; and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined.”

In order to understand this prophecy you need to realize that the word “week” actually means a period of seven years.

Gabriel said that it would be “7 weeks” (or 49 years) and “62 weeks” (or 434 years), starting from the commandment to rebuild Jerusalem. It took 49 years to rebuild Jerusalem, and 434 years later the Messiah was crucified. A generation later, in 70 AD, the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple – exactly as Gabriel foretold.

This means God told Israel *exactly when Jesus was going to die*. This gave them a very good idea concerning when the Messiah would be born! Jesus would almost certainly die as an adult, which meant He would probably be born 20 to 40 years before His death. Israel couldn't know the exact year of His birth but they *could* know when to start looking for Him. The Messiah would have to be born in a pretty narrow range of years.

This means Israel had no excuse for being caught off-guard by His sudden appearance. He came exactly when God said He would come, He did exactly what God said He was going to do, and events unfolded exactly as God said. The Lord didn't keep any of this a secret.

The Sacrificial System

God didn't stop there. For more than a thousand years before the coming of the Messiah, the nation of Israel lived under the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law. In that system an innocent sacrifice was offered for the sins of others. People brought lambs, bulls, and goats to the temple and killed them in order to obtain forgiveness for their sins.

Through this system God taught Israel that forgiveness can only come through the sacrificed blood of an innocent party. People couldn't earn their salvation through their good works! Forgiveness could only come by blood and required the substitutionary death of someone who was innocent. That innocent person had to die in the place of the guilty person. Only then could sins be forgiven.

All this pointed to what the Messiah was going to do. This is how John the Baptist introduced Christ:

John 1:29: “The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”

John the Baptist said that Christ was the “Lamb of God”. How did lambs take away people's sins? They were *sacrificed!* They were killed, and their shed blood purchased forgiveness. John was pointing out that the Messiah was the Lamb of God. He came to die for us. He shed His own blood for our sins so that we might be forgiven. Jesus was the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament sacrificial system. All along that system was pointing to what Christ would one day accomplish.

When Jesus was having communion with His disciples, He said this about His blood:

Matthew 26:28: “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

Jesus is the Lamb of God. The only way to obtain forgiveness for our sins is through His blood:

Colossians 1:14: “In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:”

Israel should have recognized who Christ was and what He came to do. After all, they had been sacrificing lambs for a thousand years. They were *very* familiar with lambs, sacrifices, and the process of atonement. Here, at last, was the Lamb of God! God didn't keep the Messiah's ministry or purpose a secret. Jesus came to die so that we might be saved.

God didn't keep this a secret. He revealed what the Messiah had come to do. In fact, on the road to Emmaus the Lord Jesus said this:

Luke 24:25-27: “Then he said unto them, Q
fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the
prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have
suffered these things, and to enter into his
glory? And beginning at Moses and all the
prophets, he expounded unto them in all the
scriptures the things concerning himself.”

God revealed the story of Jesus in the Old Testament, centuries before it happened. Moses and the prophets had already proclaimed it to the world! The problem wasn't that God kept it a secret; the problem was that people didn't believe what God told them.

Pax Romana

There was another way God prepared the way for the Lord, and that has to do with choosing the time when the Messiah came. To understand that we need to step back and take a quick look at history.

When the Old Testament closed with the book of Malachi, the Jews were back in the land but had begun abusing the sacrificial system. When the New Testament picked up the story 400 years later, Caesar Augustus decreed that all the world should be taxed. The full story of what happened during that four century gap aren't recorded in our Bibles but they're important. God used those years to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

Interestingly, God told the prophet Daniel what would happen during those 400 years. This prophecy can be found in Daniel 8. God began by showing Daniel a ram with two horns:

Daniel 8:3-4: “Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a
ram which had two horns: and the two horns
were high; but one was higher than the other,

and the higher came up last. I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and became great.”

Gabriel later explained that this ram was the Medo-Persian Empire:

Daniel 8:20: “The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.”

This empire ruled over Judah during the time of Daniel. It did indeed push westward, and northward, and southward, growing in strength and dominating the nations around it. However, this dominance didn't last. The ram was defeated by a goat:

Daniel 8:5-7: “And as I was considering, behold, an he goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes. And he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing before the river, and ran unto him in the fury of his power. And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand.”

Gabriel explained what this goat actually was:

Daniel 8:21: “And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king.”

The goat and its great horn represented Alexander the Great. During his life Alexander was an unstoppable force who conquered much of the world. He crushed the Medo-Persian Empire and took its place. However, Alexander died when he was at the height of his power:

Daniel 8:8: “Therefore the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven.”

Alexander died at the age of 32. Since he left no heir, his empire was broken up among his four generals and became four different kingdoms. This is how Gabriel explained it:

Daniel 8:22: “Now that being broken, whereas four stood up for it, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but not in his power.”

Israel was conquered by the general Ptolemy. This period (called the Egyptian period because Ptolemy also ruled over Egypt) lasted from 323 BC to 204 BC.

In 204 BC Antiochus invaded Judah and conquered it. This began what's called the Syrian period, which lasted until 165 BC. Things became especially bad for the Jews when Antiochus Epiphanes IV (175 – 164 BC) began his reign of terror. This is how the book of Daniel describes what happened:

Daniel 8:9-11: “And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and

toward the pleasant land. And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them. Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of the sanctuary was cast down.”

Antiochus Epiphanes IV did all of these things. Under his reign the temple was desecrated, the sacrifices were abolished, and a pig was sacrificed on the altar. The temple was even rededicated as a pagan temple to the false god Jupiter.

This horrific desecration of the temple angered the Jews so much that they launched the Maccabean revolt (167 – 160 BC). Judas Maccabeus assembled an army and recaptured Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and resumed the sacrifices. Antiochus was defeated in Persia and didn't attempt to take Jerusalem back. This is how the book of Daniel describes his end:

Daniel 8:24-25: “And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand.”

Antiochus Epiphanes IV was indeed “broken without hand”. He didn't die in battle and he wasn't assassinated either. History tells us that he died of some sort of disease.

After Antiochus died, his son invaded Judah and defeated Judas. Judas then retreated to Jerusalem, which was put under siege. Just as Jerusalem was on the verge of defeat, Lysias (the self-appointed regent of Syria) persuaded the invading army to

make peace instead. The city of Jerusalem was spared.

But there was more trouble ahead. After Lysias, a man named Demetrius reigned over Syria. Under his rule Judas was killed. Judas' brother Simon then took over leadership of the army. He conquered the Syrian outposts in Judah and forced the Syrian garrison in Jerusalem to surrender.

In 49 BC a civil war broke out between Pompey and Julius Caesar. A man named Antipater sided with Caesar and gave him some much-needed support. In return Caesar appointed Antipater as procurator over Judah. Antipater then appointed his son Herod as governor over Galilee. This is the Herod who was reigning when Christ was born. Herod was later made the King of the Jews by Rome.

Since Herod wanted the Jews to accept him he went to great lengths to make the temple in Jerusalem more magnificent. However, Herod wasn't a particularly moral person. He was the man who did this:

Matthew 2:16: “Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.”

There's a lot more that can be said about the inter-testament period. (For example, I haven't even touched on the rise of the Sadducees and Pharisees.) The point I want to emphasize is that the time between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of Christ was full of wars, revolts, and peril. It was a difficult time in history. Empires waged war against other empires, and control of Jerusalem changed hands again and again. However, there was a brief era of peace – and that era of peace coincided with the ministry of Christ.

The Pax Romana (the Roman Peace) lasted from the

ascension of Augustus in 27 BC to the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD. During that time there was peace throughout the Roman Empire. This is critically important! If the time of Christ's ministry had been full of wars and invasions then His ministry would have been greatly hampered. No one would have been setting out on missionary journeys; instead they would have been fleeing for their lives. If armies had invaded Israel while Jesus was preaching then no great crowds would have come out to see Him. They would have been too busy hiding in caves or fortified cities.

But the Pax Romana was in effect during the lives of Christ and His disciples. This gave them great freedom to move from city to city and province to province. This meant people were free to come out and hear Him. It was a rare period of safety and order – which was precisely what the church needed to become established. It would have been very difficult for Paul to go from city to city if the empire was in a time of war and barbarians were burning cities to the ground. Jesus came at just the right time! Before Pax Romana there were wars and revolts in Judah, and after Pax Romana the Roman Empire decayed and fell into ruin. There was one window of opportunity, and that's when Christ came. The Lord used history itself to prepare the way for the Lord!

John the Baptist

We've already seen that God gave Israel many Messianic prophecies so they would recognize the Messiah and understand what He came to do. However, God didn't stop there. He also promised to send someone who would prepare the way for the Lord. This was prophesied by Isaiah:

Isaiah 40:3-4: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every

mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

The prophet Malachi also talks about this same person, who is called the messenger of God:

Malachi 3:1: “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.”

The reason we know these verses are talking about John the Baptist is because the Bible tells us! We can find it in the book of John:

John 1:19-23: “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. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.”

John the Baptist fulfilled these prophecies and told the world that the advent of the Messiah was at hand. Not only did John tell people that the Messiah was coming, but he also *pointed*

Him out! When Jesus came to be baptized by John, he immediately pointed Him out and said that He was the Lamb of God. John spent years telling people that the Messiah was coming, and then he *literally* pointed people to Jesus.

Keep in mind that John the Baptist wasn't an obscure person. Everyone in the area had heard of him and knew what he was doing:

Matthew 3:5: “Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan,”

This means *everyone* should have known that the time of the Messiah was at hand. When John the Baptist pointed to Christ and said “Behold the Lamb of God!”, that should have been something everyone understood.

John the Baptist accomplished his mission. The nation was told that the Messiah was coming, and *John personally identified who the Messiah was*. God didn't keep the identity of Jesus a secret!

But John did more than just tell people that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. He also laid the groundwork for Christ's ministry. John really did prepare the way for the Lord. He commanded people to repent, for the kingdom of Heaven was at hand:

Matthew 3:1-2: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

The Messiah was coming! Now was the time for everyone to repent of their sins, because judgment was at hand. All of the people were going to have to make a choice: would they accept their Messiah, or would they reject Him and bring judgment upon themselves and their nation?

It's true that the Messiah had to die to save us from our sins, but Israel did *not* have to reject Him. They could have listened to Him and repented. In fact, that's precisely what John the Baptist told the people to do. He commanded everyone to repent of their sins and prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah. He warned that terrible judgment was coming:

Matthew 3:10: “And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”

There had been four hundred years of silence since the close of the book of Malachi, but those years of silence were over. The Messiah was at hand! He would forgive all those who repented and believed, but He would destroy those who rejected Him. John warned that judgment was near and the ax had been made ready. Those who didn't repent would be cast into the fires of Hell. The Messiah wasn't a person who could be treated lightly or rejected with impunity:

Matthew 3:11-12: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

The message of John the Baptist was clear: the Messiah would gather His wheat and burn His tares. Those who repented of their sins and believed in Him would be saved, and those who didn't would be burned with “unquenchable fire”. Those were the only possible options. The time of waiting was over and it was now the time of decision. The nation was going to be forced to

make a choice.

The problem was that Israel believed they were saved by virtue of their birth. They thought that since they were children of Abraham they were automatically saved. After all, they were God's chosen people! They didn't need to do anything, and they certainly didn't need to have their sins forgiven. John warned them that this kind of thinking was deeply wrong:

Matthew 3:8-9: “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.”

God wasn't impressed by their genetic lineage. What God wanted was for people to *repent and believe*. Their ancestor Abraham couldn't save them! Only belief in the Messiah could do that. John commanded the people to repent – and that's the same message Jesus preached as well.

Not only did John the Baptist literally point to Christ, but he also prepared the hearts of Israel. He told them judgment was coming and the kingdom of Heaven was at hand. He warned them that it wasn't good enough to be a physical descendant of Abraham; they needed to repent or else they would be cast into Hell. He made it clear that the Messiah was at hand, and He would gather all those who rejected Him and burn them with unquenchable fire.

John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord. However, just as the Scriptures foretold, the nation of Israel rejected the Messiah. Christ came unto His own, and His own received Him not. Since Israel rejected Him, God sent His judgment upon the nation. The Romans destroyed both Jerusalem and the temple, and the Jews were scattered among the nations. The church age began and God gathered a people for Himself among the Gentiles – but that's a lesson for another time.

The point is that God went to *great lengths* to prepare the

way for the Lord. The coming of the Messiah wasn't a secret, and what the Messiah was going to do wasn't a secret either! The people should have recognized Him but they didn't. They should have accepted Him but they didn't. They had no excuse for their utter failure. God did indeed prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, but people simply weren't interested in Him.

One day the Lord Jesus Christ is going to return to this world. He's coming again! Just as God prepared the way for His first coming, so He's prepared the way for His return. God has given us signs to watch for so that we might not be caught by surprise when He returns (Revelation 3:3, Revelation 12:1-5). Are you ready for His return and watching for it, or will you be taken by surprise at His appearance?