

The Cast of Christmas 1 – The Prophets
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I want to begin by letting you know you officially have 23 days of shopping until Christmas Eve. Don't worry too much because you can shop online any time of the day or night and just wait for the packages to arrive in the mail. Approximately 2.5 billion packages will be shipped this holiday season. They'll do the work, and all we have to do is click and wait.

Today we are beginning our new sermon series: The Cast of Christmas. My sermon today is about the prophets who prophesied about Jesus.

They were waiting for their Messiah, just as Christmas is a time of waiting and expectation for us. I remember as a child hardly being able to wait to open my gifts. I'm sure my parents got tired of us kids asking, "Can we open our gifts now, can we open our gifts now?"

As we prepare and wait for Christmas, it occurs to me that the vast majority of our lives is filled with waiting and preparation while only a fraction is filled with actual experience, celebration, or doing stuff.

Consider the Thanksgiving meal many of us recently enjoyed. How long did it take to prepare it? How long did it take to eat?

Or, have you ever been to Disney World? On busy days, wait times are two hours for a ride that's a few minutes long. When the Frozen ride opened, people waited five hours for a five-minute ride!

If we stop to think about it, we really shouldn't be surprised that life is filled with so much more preparation and waiting than doing, because in some ways preparation *is* the doing. In fact, preparation is often the point.

In fact, our short time on earth is more about preparation for eternity in heaven than what we accomplish or do on this earth. So, the best use of our time on earth is to prepare our hearts to become more like Jesus and to help other people get prepared to meet Jesus in heaven.

The primary point of the Old Testament is preparation for one moment. We first see this in the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible. A messianic prophecy is a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. It takes place directly after Adam and Eve fell into sin when God declared to the serpent in Genesis 3:15:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will bruise His heel.

This first prophecy says that the serpent would bruise the Messiah's heel, but the Messiah would crush Satan's head. This is speaking of Jesus - the One whom Christmas celebrates. It points to His victory over sin, Satan and death!

From the moment of the first sin onward, the entire Old Testament prepares and points us to the great moment when our Savior and Messiah came to save us from the curse of sin. The law and all the temple sacrifices show our need for a Savior. The slavery and sorrow of the Israelites point to the bondage we all face before we acknowledge His arrival. The prophets looked and longed for His coming.

After His resurrection, Jesus showed this to the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:27:

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.

One of the unique and fascinating aspects of the Bible is that no other religious literature has the accuracy of fulfilled prophecy. In fact, one of the main reasons we know that the Bible is God's Word is because of fulfilled prophecies. There are 100s of prophecies in the Bible which predict future events – all of which are 100% accurate.

There are over 300 prophecies about the messiah given by 30 prophets over thousands of years – all of which came to pass in one person – Jesus Christ. No other person who has ever lived or ever will live can have all these prophecies come true in their lives. This shows the supernatural origin of Jesus Christ and of the Bible. Romans 16:25-26 says:

Now to Him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey Him.

With great detail, God singled out His Son, Jesus Christ, from anyone who has ever lived in history - past, present, or future. The Bible predicts His exact lineage; the place, time and manner of His birth; where and how He would minister, how people would react, how He would die – by crucifixion – and this prophecy was written 800 years before crucifixion even began to be practiced by the Romans.

The amazing thing is that all the prophecies of the Messiah were made at least 400 years before He was born. You could possibly find one or two prophecies fulfilled in other men, but not all 300 prophecies.

That would be like someone predicting today who will be President of the United States in 500 years.

Not only that, but where they will be born, who their parents would be, what they will do before becoming President, where they will live, how they will die. It's impossible – with man – but possible with God.

The science of probability says the chances of just 48 of these Messianic prophecies being fulfilled in one person is 1 in 10 to the 157th power. To help us understand this staggering figure, suppose we take silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas (approximate area: 263,000 square miles). They will cover all of the state two feet deep.

Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes anywhere in the state. But he can pick up only one silver dollar, the one that was marked. What chance would he have of getting the right one? The same exact chance that only 48 of the 100's of Messianic prophecies coming true in any one man.

By the way, the chance of just eight of the Messianic prophecies coming to pass in one individual is 1 in 10 to the 17th power. And I can give you eight Messianic prophecies that were fulfilled just in the birth of Christ:

- Genesis 49:10 prophesied that Christ would be from the tribe of Judah
- Jeremiah 23:5-6 prophesied that the Messiah would be from the lineage of King David.
- Micah 5:2 prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
- Isaiah 7:14 prophesied that the Messiah would be born of a virgin.
- Psalm 72:9-10 prophesied that shepherds would bow before the Messiah and kings would give Him gifts.
- Malachi 3:1 prophesied that the Messiah would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare His way.
- Hosea 11:1 prophesied that the Messiah would be called out of Egypt.
- Jeremiah 31:15 prophesied that many children would be killed when the Messiah arrived.

The fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies alone proves that God inspired the writing of the Bible and that Jesus Christ is the Messiah – the Savior of the world!

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah was inspired by God to look forward to His birth. In Micah 5:2, he wrote:

But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.

The one from ancient times whom Micah wrote about has more than one hundred different names in the Bible.

He's called the Alpha and the Omega, the Word of Life, the Bright Morning Star, the Light of the World, I Am, the Ancient of Days, Jesus. His name Emmanuel means "God with us."

And when Jesus arrived, He came humbly, quietly, in a small and forgotten town that didn't even have a proper room for His arrival. For hundreds of years, the Israelites and the prophets looked for Him and waited for His rescue – and when He arrived they missed it! As the Old Testament prophets waited for Jesus's arrival, we wait and prepare for His Second Coming.

The season of advent begins today – which is four weeks before Christmas when we wait and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. In some ways we know what the prophets who looked for Jesus went through. Like them, we know Jesus is coming again, and we don't know when. Like them, we need to prepare our hearts to receive and grow in Him now as we anticipate the day when we will meet Him face-to-face.

We will soon witness His arrival, or we will soon meet Him at the end of our own lives. Either way, we must be prepared!

John the Baptist was the last prophet who had to wait for Jesus's first arrival. He shows us how to prepare our hearts for Jesus in our lives now and how to prepare our hearts for Jesus's return.

1- Preparation Begins with Repentance

In Matthew 3:2, John the Baptist says: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

Repentance in its simplest definition means "to turn." So, John isn't calling out, "You all better start feeling really guilty for all the things you've done." He's not saying, "I want you to feel really bad." Yes, repentance certainly can begin with feeling really bad. But what John is saying is, "Change the way you think and act because the kingdom of God is here."

In the same way, Advent gives us an opportunity to consider our lives and make changes. Is this Christmas going to be like all the rest? Rushed? Stressful? Overwhelming? Or will we take our cue from the prophets of old who were waiting and preparing for His arrival? Will we allow this season to be one of reflection, worship, and repentance?

Despite the vast array of Old Testament prophecies describing the birth, life, and death of the Messiah, there was at least one idea that caused the majority of the religious leaders to miss the gift when it came. Strangely enough, when they looked for salvation, they weren't really thinking about their need for salvation from sin. Instead, they were looking for salvation from foreign rule and oppressive government.

And their mistaken belief about the mission of the Messiah caused them to miss out on His true mission: to save them from their sins! Let's not make the same mistake. We are not in desperate need of a Santa Claus who will give us gifts! We are desperate for a Savior who will save us from our sins! That happens when we repent of sin and place our faith in Jesus Christ!

2- Preparation Increases with Expectation

Have you ever considered how you would prepare for work or school if you expected Jesus to be sitting there when you arrived? How would you spend your time getting ready in the morning if you knew the Holy Spirit was just waiting to tell you something amazing? If you knew you were living in the Last Days, would you do things differently? If we had such expectations, surely it would affect our preparations for each season and every day.

And the fact is: Jesus will be at work and at school when you arrive. God is always ready to meet you as you reach out to meet Him. And we can be certain that all of us are in our own individual Last Days regardless of how long it takes for Jesus to return.

Perhaps knowing that Emmanuel is here with us now, was here with us yesterday, and will be here with us tomorrow should change the way we prepare for Christmas, work or school tomorrow morning.

3- Preparation Results in Fruit

There is one test that demonstrates whether or not you or another person has repented: your behavior will change. In Matthew 3:8, John the Baptist says, *Bring forth fruit worthy of repentance.*

If a person commits a sin against you, apologizes, and then does the same thing over and over, have they really repented? Now I'm sure your friend who apologized felt truly sorry. However, the fruit of their life shows whether or not they've truly had a change of heart.

In the same way, the fruit of our lives shows our repentance. Sometimes the change is incremental, and it takes time until it's complete. But if you aren't walking away from sin, you haven't repented of sin. If you're not fighting against sin, you haven't repented of sin!

Do you want to know if you're preparing for Christ's arrival? Just answer this question: "Is my life bearing fruit?" There are many varieties of spiritual fruit: increased service, a closer relationship with God, a greater ability to encourage or care for others, a stronger family life, victory over sin, greater peace, deeper love.

Think of your life three or four Christmases ago. Do you have more fruit in your life?

If so, keep going. You're getting ready. You are effectively preparing. If not, it's not too late to start bearing fruit. Repent of complacency, religion, or anything else holding you back. Draw near to Him in expectancy, and look for ways to fruitfully live out your faith. Christmas is coming. The Second Advent is coming. In our expectation, let's get prepared.

The promise all the prophets clung to was that they would be rescued. It's so important that we remember our preparation is not our salvation nor is it our rescue. Rather, our preparation is our response to what Jesus has already done for us and in us.

In 2013, the movie *Captain Phillips* starring Tom Hanks was released. It's based on the true story of how Somali pirates commandeered a cargo ship piloted by Captain Phillips. One of the best moments in the film—and the moment that had to be one of the best moments of the real Captain Phillips's life—is when out of the darkness the horns of the USS *Bainbridge* thunder through the sea and floodlights illuminate the ocean and the lifeboat. You can see the relief and elation wash over Captain Phillips's face.

The USS *Bainbridge* is one of 75 guided missile destroyers in the US Navy with the ability to destroy more than 100 targets simultaneously. When the *Bainbridge* comes to the rescue, you know the pirates are in trouble and that a real hope has finally arrived.

Likewise, in the midst of nativity scenes and the soft sweetness of "Away in a Manger" we must remember that Christmas was a rescue mission. And the One who came to our rescue wasn't some outgunned, outclassed, or hopeless underdog. The One who came to our rescue was Emmanuel—God with us—who had the power and authority to call down all of the angels of heaven!

The Ancient One humbled Himself to become fully man because we were the hostages being held captive by sin. Christmas was the beginning of a rescue mission that was conceived and carried out on our behalf by none other than God Himself.

So, this Advent I am not expecting and preparing to be stressed out and overwhelmed.

I am not expecting things to fall apart.

I am not preparing to be defeated – I am preparing for victory!

I am waiting expectantly for God to come through for you and me.

I am waiting expectantly for Jesus to be revealed in our lives.

I am waiting expectantly, knowing that He is preparing me for heaven and conforming me to His image.

I am waiting expectantly for the plans He has for you, for me, and for this church.

I am waiting expectantly for His kingdom to advance.

I am waiting expectantly for the lost to be found and the blind to see.

I am waiting expectantly for His love to be made known to a hurting and dying world through you, through me, and through His church.
I am waiting expectantly for Jesus to return and to claim His bride.

Emmanuel, God with us has come to us. We have been rescued. And through His rescue, we have been saved and brought back home. If all the prophecies about the first advent of Jesus Christ came true, you can be sure that prophecies about His second coming are true!

Jesus said He is coming back and we must be ready. In fact, the Bible ends with these words in Revelation 22:20:

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming quickly." Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

People in the time of Christ believed that the kingdom of God would come to the earth then and Jesus would rule the earth and they would rule with Him. They had their facts right – they just had the timing wrong.

They did not understand that Jesus came the first time as a suffering Servant – but He's coming back as a conquering King!

Jesus came to earth the first time as the Lamb that was slain – but He's coming back as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah!

He came the first time submitted to kings in earthly authority – but He's coming back with all power and authority!

The first time Jesus was a baby dressed in swaddling clothes; the second time He's wearing a robe dipped in blood!

He came the first time to die; but He is coming back to raise the dead.

The first time He wore a crown of thorns; the next time He will wear a crown of glory.

The first time He died on a cross; He's coming back as a conquering King.

The first time He came in meekness; He is coming again in majesty.

The first time He rode a lowly donkey into Jerusalem; when He comes back He will be a conquering King riding a white horse leading the armies of heaven.

His name will be written on His thigh: King of Kings and Lord of Lords. When He comes again every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Are you ready for that great and glorious day? Are you ready to meet your God?