

Christmas Bible Study #2 - Preparation

(for sermon on 10-Dec-2023)

Before we begin, how do you prepare for Christmas – both - practically and spiritually?

***Practically:** Prepare a list of gifts you want to buy; organize special days that you get together with family and friends over a meal to celebrate; decorate your home – Christmas tree, lights and decorations; send Christmas Cards and messages.*

***Spiritually:** Take time to reflect on the spiritual significance of Christmas. Reflect on God's promises of sending a Messiah. Reflect on the love, joy, peace and certain hope of salvation that the birth of our Lord Jesus brings. Read the relevant Old Testament promises fulfilled by Jesus' birth. Read the accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 1-2, Luke 2).*

Consider reading Luke's Gospel (24 chapters) one per day; so that by Christmas Day, you have the full story of Jesus' Mission.

Engage in daily advent devotions of readings and prayers

Share the love of Jesus with others – which takes many forms!

Use the Christmas period – to tell others about the hope you have in Jesus!

Read Isaiah 40:1-5

1. What is the context of Isaiah 40? What shift is there compared to chapters 1 to 39?

The context of chapter 40 is that Isaiah has warned of a coming exile of Judah to Babylon.

Chapters 1 to 39 have carried a strong tone of judgment and warning.

Now the tone shifts from chapter 40, to being mainly about comfort and blessings to come – and full of God's glory. And chapters 40-66 focus on the coming Messiah!

2. What happened in chapter 39?

In Isaiah 39, the prophet Isaiah told King Hezekiah that there was a time coming when everything in his palace and the treasures that the King's predecessors had stored up, will be carried to off to Babylon and nothing will be left, and people (even from the royal household) will be carried off into exile in Babylon.

3. What is promised in verses 1 to 2?

There is a promise of God's comfort (see 2 Corinthians 1:3) to the brokenhearted people of Jerusalem and Judah. The reason God's comfort can be promised is because Jerusalem (Judah) has served its sentence (punishment) for their sin and rebellion. Remember back in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 God said there would be blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Isaiah is saying these curses (punishments) have been paid for – more than enough – Isaiah says paid in "double"

Does it seem unfair that God would have a double payment for sin? "Double means 'to fold over, fold in half' (Exodus 26:9). When something is folded over, each half corresponds exactly with the other half, and this would yield the thought of exact correspondence between sin and payment." (Motyer) A payment has been made, and it was exactly the payment that was needed.

Our sins are never pardoned just because God has decided to "let us off the hook". That would make God unholy rather than holy and just. He couldn't do that because He cannot look at sin (Habakkuk 1:13). Sin must be punished and paid for. In the Old Testament it was through animal sacrifices and punishment to the sinful people that sin was paid for. In the New Testament (New Covenant) it is not US who pays for our sin, but the sin-bearing promised Messiah, our Lord Jesus, who received God's anger for OUR sin!

4. What has been completed in verses 1 and 2?

The punishment for sin. In this case the time in Exile is done – the sin paid for!

5. Who is the one whose voice is calling? (cf. Malachi 3:1; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3 and John 1:23)

Isaiah looks forward to the coming of the Messiah by talking about a person whose voice is crying in the wilderness.

This idea of a voice calling in the wilderness is preparing the way for someone else.

This voice preparing the way is also mentioned in the following passages:

Malachi 3:1: "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

Matthew 3:3: This is he [John the Baptist] who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Mark 1:3: "a voice [John the Baptist] of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

John 1:23: John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

6. Who is this one whose voice is calling preparing for?

John the Baptist's voice is calling people to prepare the way for the Lord Himself.

7. What does it mean to "**make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord**" (cf. Proverbs 3:5-6)

"Make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord" should be interpreted to mean preparing a way for the Lord, making a path for the Lord to come and manifest His presence. The desert is often used symbolically in the Bible to represent a place of barrenness, hardship, or spiritual desolation. The call to "make straight" implies removing obstacles that are preventing us from receiving the Lord into our hearts and preparing a clear and direct route for the arrival of the Lord in our hearts.

Proverbs 3:5-6 puts it this way: ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

8. What obstacles are overcome in verse 4?

To continue with the metaphor of a straight highway for the Lord; any valleys will be raised and every mountain will be made low; and any rough ground will be level and any rugged places will be like a plain. In other words, the path for the Lord, the King of Kings, to come to us will be a smooth level road.

This means any obstacles prevented the Lord coming into our hearts must be removed.

Obstacles like: sinful behaviour – anger, hatred, unforgiveness, bitterness, grudges, addiction, impatience; language; sexual impurity. Obstacles like doubt and unbelief; busyness, worldliness, fear and anxiety; negative influences from family and friends. All these obstacles need to be jettisoned to make the path straight for the Lord to come into our hearts.

9. What is being revealed in verse 5? (cf. Luke 2:30; 3:4-6)

The glory of the Lord is being revealed. Because the Lord Himself is coming!

Luke 2:30 – When Simeon held baby Jesus in His arms, he said: "my eyes have seen your salvation" (i.e., God's glory)

Luke 3:4-6 – As John the Baptist goes into the wilderness to preach a baptism of repentance, he quotes from Isaiah 40 and says the people will see God's salvation (i.e., God's glory!)

10. What comfort is there in Isaiah 40:1-5? a) for the people in Isaiah's day and b) for us today?

For the people in Isaiah's day who are either in exile or heading into exile; they know there is an end to their punishment, an end to exile; and there is also the promise of God's salvation coming to His people. For us today; we already know that God's salvation has come to us, 2000 or so years ago; and that we have salvation in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. We also, know, from God's Word, that Jesus will come again, not to bear sin but to bring that salvation to realization for all who waiting for Him (Hebrews 9:28)

11. How does Isaiah 40:1-5 relate to the time of Advent and the theme of anticipation and preparation for the coming of Christ?

At the time of Advent – we reflect back to Jesus' first coming and we relive the anticipation that was felt by Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the Magi, Simeon and Anna. As we reflect, we must realize without Jesus' birth we don't have His death for sins to be forgiven, we don't have His resurrection for eternal life and we don't have any hope. So, it's good for us to prepare our hearts anew to receive His salvation and thank and praise God for that first Christmas gift in His Son, born of a Virgin, as promised.

Just like Isaiah calls for people to get their hearts reading for the coming of the Lord; at Advent we are called to get our hearts ready to receive Christ Jesus, with self-examination and repentance; and removing the obstacles that prevent us from having a close relationship with the Lord.

Read Matthew 3:1-12

12. Who is John and what is his simple yet profound message in verses 1 and 2?

John is the cousin Jesus and son of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

John was born miraculously to Elizabeth and Zechariah when they were old and beyond child-bearing age. He is the Baptist.

His message is to repent for God's Kingdom is near (as Jesus is about to start His ministry)

Repent is to do a U-turn in our lives. We are travelling away from God and going our own way and not following His way; and we do a U-turn and say sorry to God for our sins; ask for forgiveness; and then commit to following God's way instead of our own way. Yes, we still will sin, but our direction is towards God and not away from God.

13. What prophecy does Matthew say is being fulfilled in v3?

Matthew says the prophecy from Isaiah 40:3 is being fulfilled and Matthew quotes that verse from Isaiah.

14. Who are we meant to think of from the Old Testament in v4? How is his ministry similar to John's?

We are meant to think of the prophet Elijah – see 2 Kings 1:8.

Elijah preached repentance to Israel and in particular to the Baal worshipping pair of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel.

When the Angel Gabriel told John's father Zechariah about the birth of John; the angel describes John as one who will "go before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah"

Jesus describes John the Baptist as the "Elijah to come" (Matthew 11:4)

Also, when Jesus' disciples asked about Elijah coming again, Jesus told them that Elijah had already come but they did not recognize him. Jesus was talking about John the Baptist being this Elijah who had already come (Matthew 17:11-13).

15. How is John's ministry described in verses 5 and 6? Does it seem successful?

People from Jerusalem, Judea and the whole region of Jordan went to John at the river Jordan; they confessed their sins and were baptized (symbolic of their sins being washed away). Yes, it seems successful.

16. Who are the Pharisees and Sadducees? Why does John address them with such strong words?

Pharisees and Sadducees were two important groups in 1st century Judaism.

They were different and often in conflict. But together, they represented the leadership of the religion of Judaism.

Pharisees:

- *They believed that a person was made righteous by keeping the law, and they believed themselves to be righteous in this way.*
- *They often misinterpreted the law.*
- *They held many traditions to be of equal authority to Scripture.*
- *They were often hypocrites in their practice, neglecting the core and spirit of the law for aspects of outward observance.*

Sadducees

The Sadducees were a Jewish sect that existed during the Second Temple period in ancient Israel, primarily from the 2nd century BC to the 1st century AD.

- *The Sadducees were associated with the priestly aristocracy and held influential positions within the religious hierarchy, particularly in the Temple in Jerusalem.*
- *They recognized only the written Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) as authoritative, rejecting oral traditions and other texts accepted by other Jewish groups, such as the Pharisees.*
- *Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees did not believe in concepts such as resurrection or an afterlife. This belief set them apart from other Jewish groups.*
- *The Sadducees were willing to collaborate with ruling powers, including the Roman authorities, to maintain their positions and the stability of the Temple. This pragmatic approach sometimes led to tension with other Jewish groups, particularly the Pharisees, who resisted Roman influence.*

John calls the Pharisees and Sadducees “you brood of vipers!”

John accused these leaders of wanting to appear anxious for the Messiah, but not truly repenting and preparing their hearts

17. What does John mean by “**bear fruit in keeping with repentance**” in verse 8?

“Many Pharisees and Sadducees may have come for baptism with the pretention that characterized their other religious activities... they were showing the world how ready they were for Messiah, though they had not truly repented.” (Carson) John reminded them that real repentance will show itself in their life. It has to be a matter of living repentance, not just talking repentance. Basically, they were hypocrites.

18. What’s the consequences of not bearing fruit?

The consequences of being like a tree that does not bear fruit; is the ax and being chopped down! In other words, judgment and punishment for those who haven’t truly repented and haven’t shown any fruit of repentance.

“No mere pruning and trimming work did John come to do; he was the handler of a sharp axe that was to fell every worthless tree.” (Spurgeon)

19. How does John describe the one coming after him? What’s the difference in the two men’s baptism?

The one coming after is more powerful than John. John says he is not worthy to carry this one coming’s sandals. The act of carrying or untying someone’s sandals was considered a lowly and servant-like task in the culture of that time. John is essentially saying that he is not even worthy to perform the humblest service for Jesus.

The declaration emphasizes the immense greatness and holiness of Jesus, highlighting that John sees himself as unworthy to perform even the most menial tasks associated with a servant. It underscores the transcendent nature of Jesus' mission and authority, indicating that John recognizes Jesus as the one who surpasses him in every aspect, including spiritual authority and significance. This expression is not about any deficiency in John but rather serves to exalt and acknowledge the divine nature of Jesus.

John's baptism was one of repentance. In this regard, it was not identical to Christian baptism or baptism into Christ (Romans 6:3), which includes a demonstration of repentance and cleansing, but also recognizes the believer's identification with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4). Jesus' baptism includes the promised out-pouring of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 37:14)

20. What does John say the one coming after him will do in verse 12? What does that mean?

The one coming will sort the wheat (believers) from the chaff.

The fire means to bring the fires of judgment. Fire will remove impurities like a refiner's fire from those who believe but will destroy those who do not believe, just like the chaff at harvest time is burnt!

21. **Ponder:** How can we be like John the Baptist as we approach Christmas and beyond?

We can be like John the Baptist by:

- *Practice humility like John did: recognizing our limitations and shortcomings – and acknowledging the Lord's greatness and the importance of serving others*
- *Emulate John's servant-heartedness by actively seeking opportunities to serve others.*
- *Fearlessly speak the truth in love, promoting righteousness and justice. Advocate for moral and ethical values in your community.*
- *Direct others toward the message of Jesus Christ through your words and actions. Share the hope and joy found in Christ, especially during the Advent season.*
- *Be bold in our faith: Exhibit courage and boldness in your faith, just as John the Baptist fearlessly proclaimed the message of repentance. Trust in God's guidance and live out your faith authentically.*

22. **Ponder:** How can we prepare our hearts this Advent season? What "advent" are we waiting for now?

- *Repentance: Daily repent and seek forgiveness. Identify the obstacles in our lives which are affecting our relationship with the Lord.*
- *Create a spiritual space for reflection, allowing oneself to focus on the significance of Christ's coming.*
- *Share messages of hope, love, and repentance with those around us. Be a source of encouragement for others in their spiritual journeys.*
- *Live a spiritual life of integrity: Strive for authenticity and integrity in our actions and words. Demonstrate the principles of justice, honesty, and kindness in your daily life.*
- *Value spiritual growth: Foster a commitment to continuous spiritual growth and learning. Participate in study groups, attend worship services, and seek opportunities for spiritual development.*

We are waiting for Jesus' second coming at an hour that we don't know (Matthew 24:44). Therefore, there is an urgency not only to prepare our hearts for Jesus' return but to share our hope of Heaven with those who don't know Jesus; and Christmas season gives us a great opportunity to do that!

Finish in prayer: Asking God to help us bear fruit in keeping with repentance and prepare for Christ's return.