

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Christ in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27): Christ as seen in the Prophets

Some time ago, as a family, we were looking at some old photograph albums. It was interesting to note that, with much hilarity, the children always looked for my wife and me in a group shot. How could anyone look like that and wear those clothes? Did you really have hair in those days? Only as a secondary issue were they interested in the places the photos were taken, or the other people in the picture. As we complete our look at the Old Testament this week, it is very much with that sense that my children had, that we approach the Prophets. Of course all Scripture is profitable, and much of what the Prophets have to say is historically very interesting, but above all it should be that in all they have to say we will see our Lord Jesus Christ.

To be an Old Testament Prophet was a risky business. Life expectancy tended to be short. You see anyone who claimed to be speaking on the behalf of Jehovah had to be 100% accurate. A prophet would make many statements. Some of these might refer to a distant future. They were quite safe, the prophet would be long gone before the truth of the statements could be verified. However, alongside these were several statements that referred to the immediate present. To get even one of these wrong was to face instant death. A false prophet was simply not tolerated. But when what you said came true, people generally didn't like it, and so you got the blame, usually in the form of a gruesome death. No, to be a Prophet was definitely not the career choice for the faint hearted! People today talk of Nostradamus and the predictions he made. And yet he simply would not have made the grade in terms of a genuine prophet. Maybe some of what he wrote about has come true, but not all, and that would have been enough to have branded him false, along with all his work. On a human level, it is this extraordinarily high standard that the Old Testament prophet faced, that enables us to look with such confidence at what they have to say. But it is also this fact that must have caused them some sleepless nights as they tried to reconcile an apparent contradiction in what they were foretelling concerning the coming of the Messiah. It is this that we shall look at this morning.

The Lord's message to the two on the road to Emmaus was "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). Peter, in 1 Peter 1:10-11, wrote along similar lines: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." Briefly put, the prophets foretold that when the Messiah came He would come in humble manner, to suffering and rejection. But the prophets also said that when Messiah came, He would come in glory to reign. Now how can these two seemingly opposite things be true about the way in which the Messiah would come? Well, as we shall see the Messiah will come twice!

Recently we were on holiday in North Wales, and the view from our cottage window was fantastic. Mountain peak next to mountain peak, capped in snow bore testimony to the glory of the Creator. Each peak looked to be next to each other, but when we actually travelled through them, what had appeared adjacent was actually quite some distance apart. In similar manner, from the distance of history, as the prophets looked forward they saw the coming of the Christ, as great peaks in the history of this world. What they did not see was the space in between, the time that God has offered salvation to Jew and Gentile alike, and worked through His body, the Church. When Jesus came nearly two thousand years ago, He fulfilled all that was expected of him as the suffering Messiah. When He comes again, He will fulfil all that is expected of Him as the reigning, glorious Messiah. But in between, He has chosen to love His bride, the Church, something that the Old Testament prophets knew nothing about. You will search the Old Testament in vain, looking for teaching about the Church. So Paul could write to the Ephesians in Ephesians 3:5-6 "...the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." Now that we have seen the background to the picture, as it were, let us take time to look at the main character in the picture in His revelation both as the suffering One, and the Lord of Glory. It is a pattern that, if we are true to Christ in our own lives, we should expect to follow. Suffering for Him now, glory with Him in a day to come. Let us not try to put the cart before the horse in our own circumstances!

Many of us will be familiar with the words in Micah 5:2. "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah" speaking of His humble birth. No royal throne, no pampered playpen for the Son of God! In the manner of His birth, He would make the lowest place

His own. Yet, as the rest of the verse tells us, "(His) origins are from of old, from days of eternity". Here was One who stepped into time at His birth, but who existed long before. As the words of the hymn put it: "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man."

Then Micah goes on to say that this same One would stand and shepherd His flock, who will live securely (verse 4). Who can imagine that today as we look at the melting pot, that is the Middle East? Israel living securely, and not because of any military strength! How can this be? Micah gives us the answer in verse 4: "His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And He will be their peace." Hallelujah! From America to Australia, from Norway to New Zealand all will know the greatness of the Lord. Human achievement will seem like child's play. He will solve impossible problems, for the good of all mankind. We won't need a commission for Africa then. There will be no third world poverty, for there will be no third world. And He will be their peace. I love these short statements that almost seem to read as an afterthought, such is His greatness. And He made the stars also (Genesis 1:16)! We are confronted almost weekly by the inhumanity and injustice on all sides in the Middle East. How many mothers have lost children, and how many husbands wives, lives shattered at the end of a gun, blown away by a bomb. Tiny steps are taken towards peace, only to be sabotaged by those who prefer hatred. But when Jesus returns, He alone will make all to be at peace, for He Himself will be their peace. Jew and Arab will live together in harmony. What was promised at His first coming, "peace on earth, goodwill to all men", that which we can know individually in our own lives now, will be a reality for all on earth when He comes again.

Perhaps Isaiah, more than any other prophet, speaks about this duality of the coming of the Messiah. His lowly advent is in view in chapters 42, 49, 50, 52 and 53. How the heart of God must have swelled with righteous pride as He declared, "Behold My servant". In Ezekiel 22:30, God laments, "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before Me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none." But what God could not find in the length and breadth of Israel, He has found in the person of His own Son! No wonder that He could tear open the heavens with delight and say, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." In Isaiah 49, He is seen as the One who was despised by the whole world, hated by the nations. The world we live in today is, in this respect, no different from the world in Isaiah's day. It still hates the Lord Jesus, and rejects His authority. That is exactly why James could say that "friendship with the world is hatred towards God." But God will have His answer and so the promise is given to the rejected One that "kings will see You and rise up, princes will see and bow down." As it were, when He comes again no king will stay on his throne. All will get up and leave their thrones, so that He alone can sit supreme. He came the first time to die! As the nails were driven into His hands, is it too fanciful to see them engraving my name, your name (Isaiah 49:16)?

If in the Psalms we saw something of the feelings of the Saviour, the prophets foretell something of His sufferings. So in Isaiah 50:6 we read, "I offered My back to those who beat Me, My cheeks to those who pulled out My beard; I did not hide My face from mocking and spitting." In the prophets we see, far more graphically than in the New Testament, the physical sufferings of the Lord Jesus at the cross. So in chapter 52 we read the awful words, "Just as there were many who were appalled at Him – His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness." Then in chapter 53 we get in further detail the suffering of the Lord, the righteous servant of Jehovah, as He was made sin for us. Throughout history, in paintings and in sculpture, we have sanitised the death of our Saviour. Scripture is never gratuitous in its portrayal of the violence, but neither does it gloss over the appalling horror of death by crucifixion. What is more is that we have to face the fact that it was the will of God to let Him endure such a death. In theory, Jesus could have died in His sleep, or from a heart attack. Would not that have been sufficient? In the words of a film critic, who had seen "The passion of the Christ": "Do we want to believe in a God who would allow His own Son to suffer so horribly?" But such foolish blasphemy is to misunderstand totally the sinfulness of sin, and the righteous requirement of a holy God. God is absolutely livid at our sin; it is an affront to all that He is. Put together all the sin of all the world throughout all of history and we have a disgusting cesspit of iniquity that is offensive in the extreme to God. All the fury that God's righteousness demanded was poured out upon Jesus, as He hung upon the cross. He suffered, and suffered in full measure. God would not let Jesus off lightly, just because He was His Son. No, at the cross a full and exact measure was required from our substitute. But thanks be to God, a full price was paid! So it is now that God can fully forgive all those who come to Him in repentance. And God will have His answer to the humiliation of Calvary! The depths of His humiliation will be matched by the heights of His exaltation. So it is also Isaiah that tells us of the glories of the future kingdom of this same Jesus. Read for yourselves after this broadcast chapters 11 and 32 and see how fully God will exalt this Jesus. It is Jesus who will judge the world, and it is Jesus whose "place of rest will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10). During His life, Jesus said that the foxes had holes and the birds of the air had nests, but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay His head. Jesus did have a place of rest on the cross - in pain and humiliation! In that day, He will rest in glory! He will reign in righteousness, and rule with justice. That which we long for now, but so rarely see, He will do. No political deals, no compromise, no "jobs for the boys". The whole of the natural world will change. The desert will bloom, the leopard will lie down with the goat, a man who dies at a hundred will be considered to have died prematurely, famine, poverty and injustice will all be a distant dream. And He alone will receive the credit. The whole world will know who has done this "for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea".

Before we leave Isaiah, we see that Jesus is introduced as the “Branch”. This is a name that threads itself throughout the prophets. He is seen as “the Branch of the LORD (who) will be beautiful and glorious” (Isaiah 4:2). We see Him in Jeremiah as the Branch of David, emphasising His royal credentials (Isaiah 23:5). Zechariah presents Him as the LORD’s “Servant, the Branch” (Zechariah 3:8), the One who so perfectly obeyed all He was given to do by His Father. Finally we see Him as “the Man whose name is the BRANCH” (Zechariah 6:12). In Jesus, all that God had expected from Adam, we find fulfilled.

On a poster, attached to the side of a church near where we live, are the words of Jeremiah, “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like My suffering that was inflicted on Me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of His fierce anger?” (Lamentations 1:12) That is still a valid question today. As we hear the prophets united in their telling of a suffering Messiah, are we so hard hearted that this means nothing to us? Sadly, to too many His suffering means very little. But to God it means everything. So in Jeremiah 23:5, we find out God’s response: “The days are coming... when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.” In the place of His rejection at His first coming, God will see to it that He is exalted at His second coming. For those of us who love Him, surely our hearts are thrilled at the prospect of this when, in the words of Daniel, “He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14). Oh, how the depths of Calvary will be reflected in the heights of His exaltation! Here on earth, in the place where He was rejected, He will be universally acclaimed. I don’t suppose people will use His name as a swear word then. In that day it will be quite right to sing praises to King Jesus!

Time does not allow a look at Hosea, to see the heartbreak of a God, disappointed at the unfaithfulness of His people. As we move on towards the close of the Old Testament, we come to the prophet Zechariah. In chapter 9, we see His humble approach to Jerusalem predicted. In chapter 11, we see the price at which He was valued. The rulers thought Him no better than a crippled slave, worth only 30 pieces of silver. Chapter 13 speaks of Him as the Shepherd who was struck by God. But in equal measure, we also read of Him as the One who will come in great glory. So in chapter 2 we read, “I myself will be a wall of fire around it, and I will be its glory within”. No building, not the riches of the kingdom, but the splendour of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, will attract the world to come to worship. In His person, He will unite both religious and political spheres as chapter 6 tells us. For centuries church and state have vied for power, to the detriment of all. In that day He will take the reins of both, to the benefit of all the earth. Chapter 14 seems to reach an insurmountable pinnacle, when in verse 9 we read “The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and His name the only name.” When He is universally acclaimed, loved and obeyed, this world will know a peace and prosperity that it can only dream of now. And it will all be due to Jesus, lowly, humble rejected Jesus!

To many, this may seem a dream, a fantasy, “pie in the sky”. So must His first coming. Who could ever have thought that He would come, that He could die? What He has done once, He will do again. These prophets have not got it wrong yet – their predictions of a suffering Messiah have all been fulfilled. Their predictions of His coming glory will be fulfilled. And what, we may ask, does all this mean to us?

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory,” (Romans 8:17). Do I deserve this? Certainly not, but it will all be because of what He has done!

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