

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Another Christmas is almost upon us! Where has the time gone since the last one? In all the busyness of getting ready for Christmas, it's all too easy to forget that, as the slogan so pointedly puts it, "Jesus is the reason for the season". It's good, then, that we are able to spend time this morning thinking about Him. May it help us to get our priorities right!

I don't know how long you have spent getting ready for Christmas – perhaps only a few days, but more probably weeks or even months! But none of us come anywhere near the fact that God was preparing for that first Christmas before even the beginning of Creation! This morning, we are going to think about some promises God made about the coming of Christ through His servant, the prophet Isaiah, some 700 years before Jesus was born. But there were other promises long before that.

There are two important prophecies in Isaiah about the coming of Christ. The first is in 7:14: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel". Matthew, as he tells his story of the birth of Christ, recognises the significance of this prophecy when he writes, 'Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:22-23). God with us! Wonderful, wonderful Saviour!

The second prophecy is in chapter 9. We'll read verses 2 and 6: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined...For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". Take time after this broadcast to read carefully through these prophecies.

This morning we will look in some detail at the second of these promises. But before we do so, it's worth noticing that Isaiah did not only prophesy the birth of Christ but he went on to speak of the death of Christ. Chapter 53 is an important prophecy about that death: "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (verse 5). The death of Christ on the cross of Calvary for our sins was the reason for His coming that first Christmas time!

Isaiah writes of the coming of Christ as being a great light to the people who walked in darkness. It's interesting, then, that in the darkness of the Christmas season we find ourselves surrounded by lights – on Christmas trees and, increasingly today, decorating the outsides of our houses and gardens and some of our public buildings. But the coming of Christ eclipses all these! John tells us in his Gospel, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men... That was the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (1:4, 9-12). Jesus Himself could say, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12). As the simple children's poem so tellingly puts it:

*The world was in darkness and nobody knew
The way to the Father, as you and I do.
They needed a light to show them the way
And the great light shone on Christmas Day.*

But Isaiah's prophecy continues, "Unto us a Child is born". It may be stating the obvious, but it is important to recognise that Jesus did not come into the world as a full grown man! On special occasions in the Old Testament He had appeared as such for a limited time. He appeared as such to Abraham to announce that Sarah, Abraham's wife, would have a son in her old age (see Genesis 18). We call such appearances 'theophanies'. But the clear message of the angels to the shepherds was, "You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12).

Why was it necessary for the Son of God to come into our world first as a baby, then grow up through childhood and manhood for some 30 years before going to Calvary's cross? It was that He might enter into every human experience, sin apart, so that now in heaven He is able perfectly to sympathise with each one of us, young and old alike. So we read in Hebrews 4:15-16: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need".

Isaiah continues, "Unto us a Son is given". For this was no ordinary child but, rather, God's own Son given to be the Saviour of the world. So John writes, "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Saviour of the world" (1 John 4:14). The angel who appeared to Mary telling her that she was about to have a Son had to say, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Problems come into all of our lives so much so that, at times, we might even begin to question, "Does God really love me?" Let us never forget this stupendous, unalterable fact that God has shown His love towards us in giving His Son, first to be born in Bethlehem's manger, and then to give His life at Calvary. Paul could exult: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32).

The third part of verse 6 continues, "And the government will be upon His shoulder". It might seem, at times, that our world is rapidly running out of control. There are problems with the financial institutions, with the environment, with hunger and famine, and with nation warring against nation. But our prophet, Isaiah, could also look forward to a day when all this will be changed: "Behold, a king will reign in righteousness" (32:1). The psalmist captures something of the joy of that day, "The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice... Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne" (Psalm 97:1-2). The One who first came as the Babe of Bethlehem will return, firstly to take His Church home to be with Himself and then, with His Church, to reign over the earth!

The Greek god, Atlas, was often depicted as carrying the world upon his shoulders, bowed down by the weight of it all. But such is the might of this coming King that Isaiah perceives the government of this world as sitting lightly upon His shoulder – in the singular. Nothing will disrupt His government! So Isaiah continues, "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever" (verse 7).

Jesus told a parable of a shepherd who, having lost one of his 100 sheep, went after it until he found it. Then we read, "...and when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing" (Luke 15:3-7). Note here that it is 'shoulders' in the plural. In this simple, but telling way, the Lord Jesus would have us learn that the care and security of each one of us, His sheep, is of much weightier concern to the Lord Jesus than even the government of this world!

It is time now to consider the names by which this Babe of Bethlehem would be known. There are five of them, so great is His Person. We will look at each of them in turn.

Wonderful

Have you watched a young child as he or she gazes up at a brightly lit Christmas tree, adorned with baubles and presents. The child's face shines with wonder and expectation. Beyond the lights, the baubles and the presents, we need this Christmas to capture a sense of the wonder of the One who was born in Bethlehem's manger.

In Judges 13, we read of one of the Old Testament theophanies. The Son of God, here described as the Angel of the LORD, appeared to Manoah and his wife to tell them of the forthcoming birth of their son, Samson. They were convinced that they had seen God (verse 22). Manoah asks Him His name. So we read, "And the Angel of the LORD said to him, 'Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?'" (verse 18).

Through the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world and His subsequent death at Calvary we can know the joy of sins forgiven and of peace with God. We learn that we have been brought into God's family as His children in all the closeness of relationship that that term implies (1 John 3:1-2). But never let us forget that we have to do with a God whose name is Wonderful. As we come into His presence, let it be with reverence and with a sense of the wonder of the great God with whom we have to do!

Counsellor

The whole plan of salvation from the manger at Bethlehem to the cross of Calvary was God's, and God's alone. We didn't ask for it. We would never have imagined such grace possible. It was all part of those eternal counsels in the Godhead when, even before Creation, the Lord Jesus was there marked out as the Lamb for sacrifice, "foreordained

before the foundation of the world” (see 1 Peter 1:19-21). I find such a plan mind-boggling! No wonder that Paul exclaims, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counsellor?’” (Romans 11:33-34). Incidentally, in verse 34 Paul quotes from Isaiah 40:13-14.

Let us never forget that lovely name, Counsellor! Today, He is still ready to give counsel, to give help and direction in all the difficulties of life if we turn to Him in prayer.

Mighty God

Yes, even as the Babe of Bethlehem, in grace taking that position of helplessness and dependence as the Child of Mary, He is still the Mighty God! In time, that might would be seen as He stilled the storm on Lake Galilee (Mark 4:39), as He brought forth Lazarus from the dead (John 11:43-44) and as He chose to lay down His life at Calvary (John 10:18).

Charles Wesley captures something of the paradox of the Mighty God and the helpless Babe in His hymn,

*Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.*

Everlasting Father

The phrase can be translated ‘Father of eternity’.

We should understand that we are still speaking of the names of the Lord Jesus. This name is not to be confused with God the Father, a distinct Person in the Godhead.

We speak of Marconi as the father, or originator, of wireless. For the first time he was able to send a message without wires i.e. wire-less, across the Atlantic in 1901. Subsequently, the British Broadcasting Corporation was set up in 1922 to transmit programmes throughout Britain. Similarly, we speak of Joseph Lister as the father of antiseptics. Both these men brought into being things that were then unknown and which we continue to enjoy the blessing of today – this despite current problems of infection in hospitals!

But what shall we say of Him who is the Father, or Originator, of eternity! Only One who is Himself eternal could fulfil such a role. And yet the Eternal was here in this world in time! So in exile on the island of Patmos, John could hear Him from heaven say, “I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:17-18).

That name gives character to all His dealings. So as we trust in Him as our Saviour, we receive from Him the gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23). This is life not just for time but for eternity! As belonging to Him we are eternally secure. So Jesus tells us, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28).

Prince of Peace

That peace was so very much part of the good news of His coming to Bethlehem. The message of the angel to the shepherds was, “I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord”. This was quickly followed by the angelic chorus, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:1-14). But significantly, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, just days before His cross, the multitudes sang, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest” (Luke 19:38). No longer is the message ‘Peace on earth’ for He who is the Prince of Peace was about to be cast out of this world and to return to heaven.

Today, He still brings His own peace to those who love Him. He would still say to us as He did to His disciples just before the cross, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).

As we come to another Christmas, let's make sure that He who is the Prince of Peace is at the heart of our celebration and rejoicing. All of us at *Truth for Today* join in wishing you all a happy and peaceful Christmas!

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