

Prepare The Way

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[0:00] I thought because the Christmas story is so familiar, we would look at it perhaps in a new way to see if we can gain some new insights about it.

There are the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Strangely enough, in the Gospel of Mark, nothing is said about the Christmas story. No shepherds in the field, no wise men coming from the east, no star of David.

None of these things. The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus' ministry as an adult. He is baptized by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit comes upon him, and he immediately engages in ministry.

So in that sense, perhaps the first 30 years or whatever are not mentioned at all. Well, when you come to the Gospel of John, none of that is there either.

And then John introduces this Greek word logos. And if you know anything about Greek philosophy, the word logos is a technical term. But it is Matthew and Mark that give us the Christmas story.

[1:11] So let me tell you a story here. And the story is this. Once upon a time, there was a really evil king.

This evil king felt very threatened about his position and power. So because he was very threatened, he decided to get rid of what is causing him threat.

So he decided to kill the children. One of those children escaped in Egypt.

And later on, this child came back and became the savior of his people. Now comes the difficult question. Whose story am I telling?

Is it Moses? Is it Moses? There was an evil pharaoh who was afraid what might happen to Egypt if Egypt is attacked or invaded by the Libyans.

[2:13] And so not wanting to fight against the Libyans while feeling insecure about what the Hebrews will do. Worried that he would have to fight against Libya and slaves at the same time.

He decided to eliminate or to reduce the danger of the slaves by having the boys killed. And yet Moses escapes and floats in the river and is taken by Pharaoh's daughter.

Later on, he kills an Egyptian and then escapes to the desert and comes back after he encounters God at the burning bush. So it looks like I'm telling you the story about Moses.

But think about it this way. There was an evil king named Herod who was not Jewish. He was Edomite and he was a fairly paranoid king.

And so he hears the good news or he is maybe for him the bad news. Where is he born king of the Jews? Because we saw his star. And he decides that the king of Jews is a danger to him.

[3:25] So he asks the wise men, the magi, to find where he is so he could go worship the king. All along he is planning on killing the child. The family is warned.

Joseph is warned. They escape to Egypt. They stay in Egypt until Herod dies. And then after Herod dies, they return to Israel, to the promised land.

And Jesus becomes the future reformer and savior of his people. So was my story about Moses or was it about Jesus?

The interesting thing to notice is that Matthew writes the story of Jesus using the framework of Moses.

Now this is not a coincidence. Matthew is trying to make a point that just as Moses was the deliverer of his people, just as Moses was used by God to save his people, Jesus is also going to be used by God to save his people too.

[4:40] So the lines are parallel. They both tell of a future deliverer who is going to come and rescue his people. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as a second Moses, a second savior, but of course with a much more greater task, namely to save the whole world and not just the Hebrews in Egypt.

That is one story. Let me tell you another story. Once upon a time, there were an old man and woman, his wife.

They were advanced in age and she was also barren. And consequently, they didn't have any children. So God sends them a special messenger to announce the birth of the child.

The father doesn't believe the messenger. And nevertheless, God says that the child is going to be born.

And the good news is announced to them. What story am I telling you now?

[6:05] Well, if you are in Genesis 17 and 18, I'm telling you the story about Abraham and Sarah.

An old couple, barren wife, no child, and yet the child will bring them great joy.

And Abraham doesn't believe and he laughs. And Sarah doesn't believe and he laughs. And so finally, when they have a child, they name him Laughter. Which means God gets the last laugh. So the moral of the story is, don't laugh when God is serious. And yet, Abraham hears the good news. So it could be that I'm talking to you about Abraham.

But maybe it is not. Maybe it's Zechariah. And if you look at the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, 25, you see the same things. So Matthew wants us to think about Moses and his calling.

[7:19] And Luke wants us to think about Abraham and his calling. Both of them are saying you will gain an insight if you think about Jesus as somehow analogous to Moses or analogous to Abraham.

If Moses and Jesus were great saviors of their people who were in bondage, what's the point of Luke? Why mention Abraham?

Because the Abraham story begins basically in Genesis chapter 12. Before that, we have, first of all, a history of the world. And it's a very bad history.

And without going into all the bad history that happened in the first 12 chapters, you only need to remember the great flood where God is so upset with the sin of the world that he decides to wipe out the human race except for Noah and his family.

And then the other major event is the Tower of Babel and all the families of the earth. And so what happens in chapter 12 is that God stops discussing the history of the world and now focuses on one family and one person.

[8:40] There is a shifting from universal history to very specific history. And it's the history of Abraham and his descendants from whom will come Jesus.

So Luke wants us to see that Jesus is also God narrowing his focus in terms of salvation, but beyond that, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made in the history of Abraham.

So the two evangelists are trying to tell us think about Moses, think about Abraham, and then you're really ready to understand who Jesus is. When you read the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, verses 5 through 25, there are several things that really stand out.

Let me point about five of them. So if you're taking notes, take good notes. I want to mention five of them. The first one is that Luke constantly keeps referring to the Holy Spirit.

So in chapter 1, verse 15, John the Baptist will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Verse 35, Mary will conceive by the Holy Spirit.

[10:08] Chapter 1, verse 41, Elizabeth, her relative, is filled with the Holy Spirit. Verse 67, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Simeon, in chapter 2, is filled with the Holy Spirit. There is this constant reference to the Holy Spirit. Why is Luke making this point about the Holy Spirit?

Because of a very important thing. He wants to make a very important point. The last prophet in the Old Testament was Malachi, and Malachi was approximately 430 B.C.

After Malachi, all the rabbis recognized that God didn't give us prophets, he didn't send messengers, he didn't send his word, that God, in a matter of speaking, was silent.

Rabbis call that the bat kol, or the daughter of the voice, in English. But the point is, is that for approximately, God hasn't said a thing.

[11:21] God is silent. And, if the last thing that he said was wonderful, it's okay to be silent, but take a look at the last thing that God said before he went silent.

Look at Malachi, the last chapter, the last verse. The last sentence, or else, I will come and strike the land with a curse.

Shape up, or I will strike the land with a curse. And that's the end of the story. And we're all wondering, what happened after that? Is he going to come and strike the land with a curse? Or is the nation going to repent? Where are we? And what he is saying now, what Luke is saying, is God, who has been silent, now is speaking again.

God, who was in some ways distant, and remote, and aloof, is back involved in our lives. And not only has he given us the Holy Spirit, as all these five different individuals illustrate, but that he is speaking.

[12:43] And the angel is speaking to Zechariah, the angel is speaking to Mary, Simeon is filled by the Holy Spirit, and God is speaking again.

God is not far away. God is near. The God who was silent has broken the silent. He has returned, and he is going to talk to us about something.

Well, he has a message to talk. He wants to convey a message. And look what Luke does. I know he is describing it correctly, but I wonder if that is really what happened.

So, verse 8. Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

And you say, oh, what's the significance of that? The significance of that is that there were 20,000 priests at the time of Jesus.

[14:09] 20,000 priests. Because there was such a large number of priests, they divided them into 24 companies or divisions.

So, so, so company number one, company number two, company number three, company number four. And, because there were far more priests than there was a need in the temple, each company would only serve two weeks in the temple.

their job was only two weeks long. One week in the spring and one week in the fall. Only two weeks. And each week they only needed two persons.

Which means, most of them never entered into the holy place to appear before God. if you was the one who was chosen, if you were the one who was chosen, if, if it was your turn, this is like hitting the lottery.

This is big time. And it's more than winning money. You get to appear before God and to, and to add oil to the candelabra or the lamp stand.

[15:29] So, out of 20,000, perhaps 3% made it. You remember the parable of the Good Samaritan.

There were priests who came by and went around him. Many people have speculated, why did the priests go around him? Some have speculated that since they were going down to Jerusalem, if they took care of a corpse, they would be unclean and they would disqualify from serving in the temple.

And if it was once in a lifetime chance, you know, twice a year that you might have that chance, you wouldn't ruin it with doing something like that. So, Luke says, they cast Lot and it was Zachariah's turn.

Well, God wants to talk to him. There are lots of ways for God to talk to him. You know what he could do? He could give him a dream.

Other people have had dreams. Joseph had a dream. Pharaoh had a dream. Jacob had a dream.

[16:48] Or, if a dream is not good enough, then, you have a vision.

Isaiah says, in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.

So, you have visions. But, no. No dreams. No visions. It's his turn. He's probably higher than a kite. This is my once in a lifetime.

And he's an old man. He's not going to come down to Jerusalem too many times. He's going to be in retirement home soon. So, maybe this is the last year. Maybe this is the second to the last year. And he, and it is his turn. I mean, how more fantastic can it be as the crowning event of all of his life? And he goes in and an angel is waiting for him.

But if, what if it was somebody else who went in? that what is the angel going to say? Oops, wrong person. I gotta go back.

[17:49] Lord, can you please send him so I can? Yes, it was casting lot. But was it really coincidence? Was it just rolling the dice?

God is waiting for him. And God is waiting for him because God has a really important message for him. and the message of course involves the birth of John the Baptist, his son, and ultimately Jesus.

It is very interesting to notice that it is not the parents who name their children. It is God who names the children.

It is God who gives them names. you know. Knowing what I know about my own children now, I'm not sure that I would have given them their names.

I don't know if these names really fit their personalities. But when names are given, it is sometimes given as a hope. Maybe this is what will happen.

[19:07] So Noah is named Noah rather than Robert. And why Noah? Because maybe he is the one who will give us rest from our work.

So they're hoping maybe this is the promised Messiah. Well, he wasn't. You know. So the parents sometimes get it right, sometimes get it wrong. If you want a funny name, if you want to inflict a name on your children or your grandchildren, let me recommend one from Isaiah chapter 8, Maher Shalal Khashbaz, which means quickly to the plunder, speedily to the spoils of war.

We're going to be invaded, defeated, and plundered. Maybe one of the, maybe if we have a president in the White House who has a child, maybe they'll name him Maher Shalal Khashbaz, or maybe the opposition party, I don't know.

But that's not a good name to name somebody. Maher Shalal Khashbaz. There is also Shi'ar Yashuv, a remnant will return, or a remnant will repent.

Of course, the wonderful one is Emmanuel. God is with us, and he is. In that case, they got it right. God got it right, which doesn't surprise me very much. But God decides to name those two boys John and Jesus.

[20:41] John is Johanan. We recognize it in English or in German in names like Johann Sebastian Bach, or Johannes Brahms.

we recognize it in female names like Ann or Anna, the A-N-N, the Ann or Anna or Hanan or Hannah or things like that.

All of these words are related to Yohanan, and Yohanan means the grace of God. So this act of salvation is going to give God the setting to show his great grace.

we are going to see God's grace in this salvation, in what is about to happen. And the other name is Jesus, which is Yeshua.

And Yeshua means, is related to Isaiah, Hosea, Joshua, and it means salvation. salvation. There are four words for salvation in Hebrew.

[21:52] This one happens to emphasize confrontation between God and his enemies, in which God will defeat his enemies. So salvation, not by paying a ransom, that would be patha and ga'al.

This is more like a confrontation. It is interesting that at the Mount of Transfiguration, both Moses and Elijah appeared.

Moses, who had faced and defeated the Egyptian gods, and Elijah, who faced and defeated the Phoenician gods. And God is saying, you know, that was first round, second round, wait till I see, you know, wait and see what I'm going to do.

You know, you're going to look like amateurs, you know, back in kindergarten. You know, by the time I'm finished, you'll really see what defeating my enemies will look like. And so what we are going to see is God's triumph over his enemies, which is an expression of his grace to us, to save us.

That is what God is going to preach. This is what God is preaching. That he is going to be John. He is going to be the agent of grace.

[23:20] He is compared to Elijah. Why Elijah? Well, because Elijah confronted Jezebel, who was a queen, and told her, you are wrong.

Baal is not the supreme deity. God is the supreme deity. And in two contests, defeated the Phoenician Baal, Baal Zebel.

And what is going to happen with Jesus is that he is going to confront Satan. And he is going to defeat him. king. But John the Baptist is going to confront king Herod, as you will see later on.

So this brave man who is not afraid to stand up in front of kings and say, you are wrong. You are disobeying God. That is that strong stuff that God is going to put in John.

So God is going to give us a great salvation of his triumph that would reflect his great grace, John and Jesus.

[24:33] But I want you to turn to chapter 1 in Luke, verse 17, because that is a very, very important verse. There are two things there I want you to see.

Please do not miss chapter 1, verse 17. He is describing the ministry of John the Baptist and he says, many of the people of Israel, verse 16, sorry, verse 16, many of the people of Israel he will bring back to the Lord their God and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Let's take a look at the first part and then we'll take a look at the second part. The first part in verse 17, he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.

In case you're not familiar with that verse, please go back to Malachi, the very last chapter in the Old Testament.

we saw that the Old Testament ends with the word curse, but look at Malachi chapter 4. Look at chapter 4 verse 5.

[26:18] See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord, before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.

He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and spike the land before the curse.

Jesus makes it clear that when he says Elijah, he doesn't mean literally Elijah, and the angel makes it clear that he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah, Elijah, but look what he will do.

Verse 6, he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children. So, John the Baptist is going to prepare the way by turning the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.

But, something else in verse 17, something else in verse 17. To make ready, the last part of verse 17 in Luke 1, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

[27:36] A people prepared for the Lord. Where does that come from? It comes from Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3.

This is an extremely important passage. If you're going to take a nap, now is not the time to do it. Chapter 40, which begins with, comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.

How many of us have heard Handel's Messiah? A voice of one, verse 3, Isaiah 40 verse 3, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God, preparing the way for the Lord. That passage is from Isaiah chapter 40, but more importantly, it's from Luke chapter 3.

So go back to Luke chapter 3. chapter 3, verse 4, Luke 3, verse 4, as is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet.

[29:05] He is telling us where he's getting it from. It's from Isaiah. Isaiah, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

And the angel says that John the Baptist is going to prepare the way of the Lord. And so as that is done, the Lord will then be the next great event.

This is a preview. This is the preparation. This is the overture. this is the beginning. But it is a very important beginning. That's the big picture, God's salvation for the world.

But God is also interested in small things. Not just big things, but small things. Please turn to Luke chapter 1. And this is where it might apply to you on a personal level.

As opposed to this huge salvation of the whole world. John 3 16, God so loved the world. Well, what about me? If he does love the whole world, does that mean me as part of the world or as me individually?

[30:20] Does God know who I am? Does he care? And then in Luke chapter 1 verse 23, when his time of service was completed, he returned home.

After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. The Lord had done this for me, she said.

In these days, he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people. His wife was barren.

She felt like an outsider. When other mothers took their kids to the park, she didn't have a child to take to the park.

When other mothers discussed, what is your kid learning in kindergarten, she didn't have a kid to go to kindergarten to tell them what he is learning.

[31:27] She felt an outsider. Psychologically, you're feeling like I have failed. I need to be a mother. I speak from experience.

My best friend, my best friend in college was married and for ten years they tried and didn't have a child. She felt more and more excluded.

We're going to go buy clothes for our children. What's she going to do? We're going to go have our children immunized. What's she going to do?

For ten years she was barren and she felt like an outsider. Her best friends tried not to make her feel like an outsider but she felt. Well, it's bad enough psychologically to feel an outsider.

It is worse when the teachers of the law put their burdens on you. There's a rabbinic statement that said several groups of people are cursed.

[32:29] I disagree with them completely. I'm not reciting this because I agree. I'm quoting this to help you understand what she was going through but I think they are really, really wrong.

The first, the most cursed people by God were single people which I know cannot possibly be true for all the fun that my students have at Trinity which reflects in all the bad grades that they get on the test because they are partying and not studying.

So, the first group cursed people are the single. The second cursed group are those who do not have children, those who are married but have no children.

children. As a matter of fact, rabbis said that if a woman is barren, her husband can divorce her because she is not allowing him to obey the commandment.

The first great commandment, be fruitful and multiply and fill the whole earth. So, a barren woman is under a special curse, said the rabbis.

[33:54] And so, you feel that religious people, at least knowledgeable people, think you're under a curse and you feel a little bit ostracized from society, you feel a little bit alone and you're getting old and you are asking yourself, in my old age when I can't work, who will take care of me?

You know. Children are a blessing. says the psalmist, if you have eight, you have eight Christmas parties to go to. Eight. If you don't have anybody, where do you go to?

Who will help you in your sickness, in your old age? And so, she felt ashamed and cursed. But guess what God does for her?

Luke chapter one, verse five. The Lord has done this for me. God is thinking, I am going to save the world.

John 3, 16. And God is saying, there is this young woman, there is this old woman who feel isolated, disgraced.

[35:15] I think I'm going to add joy to her life. And God, who sees the big picture, also sees the small picture.

I count. I know I count because not even a hair falls without the knowledge of my father.

I've always thought it would be fun. I have prayed about this. I don't know what that tells you about my prayer life. But I've prayed that it would be like a practical joke to go to a barber and for God to

say, not today.

And the barber going like this and nothing happens, you know, starts to think what's wrong with the instruments. God knows, God knows this.

I'm not going to pull it. I have to ask his permission first. But God knows even small things about me. And he understands our shame.

[36:19] He understands our disgrace. And he is there to help us. And he will send his grace and he will send his power. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen. That's just first base. We still have second, third, fourth, and then home. God bless you.