

Study Three - The Messenger

Warming up!

Prediction can be a profitable business. Those who saw the financial crisis of 2008 on the horizon presumably made a lot of money before the majority of us lost some!

Economist Nouriel Roubini was one such 'prophet of doom'. In 2006 he was ridiculed for identifying massive vulnerability in the US banking system and predicting its collapse. Now he's a guru!

We live in an age of information overload, so how easy is it to look at what is going on in the world, our own country, or even our own town or street, and form an opinion of what's likely to happen over the next five years if action is not taken?

What would you predict?

How likely would it be that you would actually do anything about your concerns, if indeed they are concerns?



Messianic Echoes!

"we get no deeper into Christ than we allow him to get into us."
(John Henry Jowett)

"The word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrarious to himself, explains the same more clearly in other places."
(John Knox)

"Faith is to believe what you do not yet see; the reward for this faith is to see what you believe."
(Augustine of Hippo)

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.... And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (part of Jeremiah 31:31-34)

When looking at prophesies pointing toward Jesus in the Old Testament it would be remiss of us to stop at his birth, because there are echoes of his life contained within the Scriptures which are important to our understanding of the bigger picture of his life, and God's plan of Salvation in general. This is the foreshadowing that we looked at briefly in our first study – as we look at the Scriptures we suddenly come across a passage which seems to contain an image of an aspect of Jesus' life, even if it was written to a different context.

As an example, Psalm 41 finds a deeply worried David pouring out his heart in poetic prayer to God. In verse 9 he says, "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." This is a very personal cry from David, who feels betrayed, but put beside Matthew 26:21-25 and the last supper as Jesus looks at his disciples dipping bread into wine, it takes on a different meaning, "Jesus replied, "The one

"I always avoid prophesying beforehand, because it is a much better policy to prophesy after the event has already taken place!"
(Winston Churchill)

"Soulish believers are inordinately curious. For example, simply for the sake of knowing what the future holds do they try to satisfy their curiosity by studying thoroughly the prophecies of the Bible."
(Watchman Nee)

"Revelation is the act of God whereby what once was concealed from men is now made known to them." (John Piper, The Wisdom We Speak, 1 Corinthians 2:6-13, July 20, 1980)

"Deeply consider that it is your duty and interest to read the Holy Scriptures."
(Adam Clarke)



who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."

Bible Scholars give us a host of Old Testament verses that have similar resonance for the Christian, here's a few,

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and he will be called 'Wonderful Counselor Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'" (Isaiah 9:5)

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."
(Zechariah 9:9 - compare with Luke 19:35-38)

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."
(Isaiah 53:3 – compare with Luke 23:20-23)

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."
(Isaiah 53:7 – compare with Matthew 27:12-14)

"They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing" (Psalm 22:18 – compare with Matthew 27:35-36)

"...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter." (part of Isaiah 53:5-12 – compare with John 1:29)

And finally, "The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."
(Psalm 110:1 – compare with Mark 16:19)

Opinions vary as to the precise number of passages within the Old Testament that Christians can realistically claim have been fulfilled in the birth, life and death of Jesus – in fact anything from 48 to over 365 according to one source. Jesus certainly saw his life and purpose as being in fulfillment of the Scriptures (Luke 24:44) so Christians cannot ignore this aspect of study, as it enables us to more easily place him in the grand picture of God's plan for Salvation.

Read Mark 1:1-8 and Isaiah 40:1-5

Key verses:

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”(Isaiah 40:3-5)

“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.” (Malachi 3:1)

“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Mark 1:4,5)



Looking @ The Word

We perhaps think of John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness with the sole aim perhaps of announcing the arrival of the Messiah, but his message was a stern call to repentance and a holy life. This is an important point because it resonates with the prophetic word of Isaiah and Malachi, from which Mark quotes.

The priests in Malachi's day were offering poor quality sacrifices and failing in their sacred duty. There's was a second class service to God. The messenger would come to cleanse and purify worship in the temple before the Anointed One of God appeared on earth.

That was the significance of John's appearance, a call to repentance and a return to a purity of worship that had been lost. A preparation for the Messiah to make his entrance, both physically and spiritually into the hearts and lives of people.

It is important to note that Jews were familiar with ritual washings, but baptism was actually reserved for Gentiles who wanted to convert, so this was a far more radical challenge than we might assume. John was preparing the people for Jesus' own message, that he had come not just for the Jews but for the whole world. Put another way, it wasn't the Jewish life that belonged to God, but the cleansed life – and that put the Jew in the same position as a Gentile.

John's words and actions were also reminding the Jews of an important point in their history, indeed he could be said to be acting it out – the Passover story of how God rescued them from Egypt, by bringing them safely through the waters and eventually to their promised land. “Come again through the waters,” John says to them, “Leave the world of sin

behind you and know what it is to be really free, when the One who is to come appears and baptizes you with the Holy Spirit!”

God is doing something new, we know this from the story of Mary, and its impact is spreading even though the people are unclear as to what God is doing! Even John seems unclear as to who is the One who will appear. Is it God himself, the longed for Messiah or mysteriously both?

One thing was clear to him. What John was doing with water, the coming one would do with Holy Spirit, with Living Water flowing into lives. Lives that would be changed.

The story is told that when Billy Graham preached in Shreveport, Louisiana, liquor sales dropped by 40% and sales of Bibles went up 300%. In Greensboro, North

Carolina, the report was that “the entire social structure of the city was affected.”

When anyone makes a commitment to Christ, when they pass through those waters of repentance and come out the other side, their life should never be the same again. If there's no change then the Spirit is not present and there's no freedom.

John the Baptist warned the people that God wanted to do something new in people's lives, and we are told that many responded to that call. Mary was told that God wanted to do something new in her life, and she responded to that call. The Advent message is very much about God doing something new, and the challenge to the world is always in how it will respond.



Time for a Discussion

- 1 Does the world still need messengers? Whose job might that be?
- 2 Where is the wilderness today where Christians might best connect with those who need to hear the message of John the Baptist (remember the Jews had to travel to John, not the other way round)?
- 3 John's message was addressed not so much to those outside the faith, but those at the heart, the Jews. Are we sometimes guilty of being too comfortable in our religious life, too self-assured, in need of being challenged? Is there anything we can do?
- 4 Look at some of the verses that seem to echo Jesus' life listed previously in this study. Do they help you to better understand the person of Jesus? Discuss how this picture of Jesus looks to you.
- 5 This passage reminds us of the importance of the act of repentance, and the symbolism of the sacrament of baptism. This might be a controversial question to some, but should conversion be accompanied by baptism, symbolising the rising out of the water to new life, rather than baptism being mainly administered in infancy?