

## Series Gospel of Luke

### Message: Preparations for the Arrival of the Messiah

#### Scripture Luke 1: 5-25; 57-79

May the joy of the Christmas season be with you!

There is a passage in one of Paul's letters which states ""When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (*Galatians 4:4-5*). Today I will focus on the ways in which God prepared for this "fullness of time," that is, for the arrival of the Messiah, Jesus.

Scripture informs us that God's plans were formed in eternity past and that He had in place a plan for the redemption of mankind before creation began. There are several references to this fact. In his letter to Titus, Paul wrote: "our faith and hope rest on the hope of eternal life, which God ... promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light" (*Titus 1:2*). In his second letter to Timothy, Paul wrote: "God saved us and called us to holy life, not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus" (*II Timothy 1:9*).

In Ephesians 1:4 Paul wrote, "He (the Father) chose us in him (Jesus Christ) before the creation of the world ..... In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will." Peter, in his first letter, wrote, "You know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for our sakes" (*I Peter 1:18-20*).

It is clear from these verses that the eternal God had an eternal plan — a plan formulated "before the beginning of time," and "before the creation of the world." In these verses it is also clear that God's plans were worked out in and through Jesus Christ. Thirdly, it is clear that God's plans did not become fully obvious until the appearing of Jesus Christ.

It was the Holy Spirit who made the plans and purposes of God understandable to the Church after the death and resurrection of Jesus, but the Old Testament saints were not without clues about what God was going to do. There is, in fact, lots of information in the Old Testament about the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. On the day of His resurrection, Jesus made reference to the information in the Old Testament when He instructed two of His followers with these words, “ ‘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?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (*Luke 24:13-27*). Later that same day, Jesus said to a larger group of His followers, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (*Luke 24:44*).

These verses indicate that there was sufficient information in the Old Testament for the followers of God to understand the plan of God, at least as far as the Messiah was concerned. God set His eternal plan of redemption in motion immediately after the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Through the following centuries, by means of promises and prophecies and miracles, God steered human history toward the arrival and ministry of the Messiah.

*[See end notes for a quick summary of information from the Old Testament.]*

When Luke began to write about the birth of Jesus, he considered one of the Old Testament prophecies to be extremely important. The prophecy described the special messenger who would immediately precede the Messiah — the person who would prepare the people for the Messiah’s arrival and introduce Him. This prophecy was so important to Luke that he actually wrote as many verses about the birth of this messenger as he did when describing the birth of Jesus.

The prophecy was given by Isaiah in chapter 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.’” The prophecy is repeated in Malachi 3:1, when the LORD said, “See I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.” As far as I can tell, the birth of this messenger was the last of the prophecies to be fulfilled before God sent His Son.

John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, was the unique messenger who had been announced by God hundreds of years previously. John was unique in his birth, in his lifestyle, and in his ministry as the last of the Old Testament prophets. This is what Luke wrote concerning his birth.

### **Read Luke 1:5-25**

John was to go ahead of Jesus to prepare the way and announce His arrival. This was very much like the ways that earthly kings are introduced. There are specific protocols which apply to earthly kings, a kind of code of behavior which is part of their public activities. God followed these protocols when introducing Jesus to the world.

Let me tell you about my experiences in the presence of a king. Perhaps this will help you understand the responsibility of John. Thirty years ago my family and I lived in a country where there was a king. The country was Iran, and the king was called by his Persian title, the Shah. I was a teacher at a college, and on several occasions I represented the college at special ceremonies when the Shah was present. On two of those occasions, I went to the palace for “greeting” ceremonies. I stood in a large ornately decorated room with representatives from the country’s educational institutions. We stood near the walls of the room and, as the Shah with his aide-de-camp walked slowly around the room, we bowed our heads as he passed by. Being in the presence of a world famous king was exciting and a little scary.

The ceremonies were always carefully planned and orchestrated. The efforts made to prepare for the king’s arrival were really impressive. Security, of course, was a major concern. Soldiers and trusted officers had spent several days checking out the facilities to make certain that it would be a secure environment. Workmen made sure that all the furniture and flowers and windows were beautiful and spotless.

When everything was safe and in order, and the invited guests were in position, then there was the dramatic announcement. The Shah’s aide stepped inside the doorway and announced with a booming voice, “Alahazraet, PadShah Aryamehre Iran” (“His Imperial Majesty, the Esteemed King of Iran”), and all the people applauded as the King stepped through the doorway and acknowledged the tribute with a nod and a wave of his hand.

Kings do not go anywhere or do anything without helpers to prepare the way, and no one is more important to them than their special assistant. This is a trusted person who acts as the confidential assistant to the king. His responsibility is to make certain that all of the arrangements have been properly made before the king makes his appearance.

In the Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus' incarnation began with a man who was assigned this special responsibility. God Himself selected the man who was to serve as Jesus' aide-de-camp. This aide was to prepare humanity for the arrival of the King of kings. This special person was to remind the people about God's promise to send the Messiah, and to call the people to repentance so they would be prepared. He was to announce the arrival of the Messiah King, and to introduce Him to the world. The name of this messenger was John.

John was an unusual man. The circumstances of his conception and birth were supernatural. His responsibilities had been described hundreds of years before his birth. The angel explained to Zechariah the qualities and responsibilities of John beginning with verse 15.

First, the angel said, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." Thirty years later Jesus said this about John: "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'" And then Jesus gave this assessment of John, "I tell you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John." In order for John to be associated with the Lord, he had to be "great in the sight of the Lord."

Also in verse 15 the angel said "He is never to take wine or other fermented drink." We have to turn back to the Old Testament book of Numbers to understand this statement: "If a man ... wants to make a special vow ... of separation to the LORD he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine. During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the LORD is over; he must let the hair on his head grow long. Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the LORD" (*Numbers 6:2-5, 8*). John was required to be totally set apart unto the LORD for his special service, and his diet and appearance was evidence of this.

Also in verse 15 “He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” John was the last of the OT prophets. Before a prophet could speak authentically for the LORD, He had to be anointed by the Lord. John was prophesied by God, birthed by God in a supernatural way, separated from society for service to God, and anointed by the Holy Spirit for his ministry as a prophet.

Verse 16 “He will bring many of the people of Israel back to the Lord their God.” In the Old Testament, prophets were sent by God to call their listeners to repentance before the onset of judgment. John was to follow in the traditions of his predecessors. During his ministry, John warned his listeners with colorful and picturesque language: “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” On another occasion he said, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” Repentance was necessary to avoid the judgments of “wrath,” “fire,” and “burning.”

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 and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.” Elijah was the prophet who confronted a large group of pagan religious leaders in the Old Testament. It was Elijah’s responsibility to call the people to return to the worship of God. This was to be John’s responsibility in his generation, in the fullness of time.

The focus of this advent season is on Jesus, and properly so. The incarnation is the greatest act of love shown to us by God. God had been preparing for the incarnation of His Son for a very long time. As I said earlier, the birth of John was the last of the prophecies to be fulfilled before God sent His Son. Let’s read about John’s birth:

**Read Luke 1:57-66**

The people on earth waited a long time for this event, but Jesus arrived just as soon as all conditions were ready. God was in control of the timing. What about God's timing in our lives? In my opinion, we must not only celebrate an event which happened 2000 years ago. We need to celebrate the occasion when Jesus came into our lives. God worked out the timing of our personal salvation just as He worked out the circumstances concerning His Son. After all, "He chose us in Him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight" (*Ephesians 1:4*). We have all had messengers who told us the good news of the Messiah. And in the fullness of time of our lives, the Father manifested His love to us, and the Son incarnated Himself into our lives by the Holy Spirit. I trust that you will be doubly filled with joy during this season as you worship your King.

## End notes

Here is a very quick summary of important information in the Old Testament: The fall of mankind into sin and the increasing sinfulness of the human race through the centuries made the need of a redeemer more and more urgent. The call of Abraham, with the promise “in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,” set the direction for the fulfillment of God’s purposes. The founding of the Jewish nation, with its theocratic character, its law, its institutions, and its religious rituals defined the parameters of what God was planning.

The promise by God to King David about a descendent who would establish an eternal kingdom was a significant insight into God’s plan. In the midst of Israel’s idolatry and judgment by exile, God repeatedly assured His people of their salvation and held out hope of the Deliverer who would come someday. There are specific references to the sacrificial death of the Redeemer and His future glories.

The revelation of the Messiah was not limited to specific promises and prophecies. Rather, all the themes developed in the Old Testament are evidence of God’s sovereignty over human activities and His guidance of history toward specific spiritual goals. So when Jesus said to His followers, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms,” He was referring to evidence throughout the entire Old Testament — evidence that gave testimony to who He was and what He had come to earth to accomplish.

I also want to read what Zechariah said after he found his voice. You will notice that his words are a summary of all the Old Testament preparations for the Messiah.

**Read Luke 1:67-79**