

Act 2

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Anticipation is one of the joys of life. As children, you anticipated Christmas or a birthday or summer vacation as a child. As you got older, it might be the anticipation of a wedding day, the birth of a child or a long-awaited cruise or vacation. It could even be the anticipation of seeing your wife at the train station. Hopefully, there will come a point for all of us when we will have that anticipation of seeing our Lord face to face in Heaven. Whatever you are anticipating, you imagine how things will go and you play it over and over in your head. Sometimes, the real thing doesn't measure up to the hype.

A resident of Israel before the time of Christ lived with great anticipation of the coming Messiah. He would be the One who would rescue them from their subjugation to other nations. They had been waiting all their lives for the Messiah. As they waited, God gave hints through prophets and promises of the One who would redeem Israel and through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. (Genesis 12). This morning we will look at some of these "hints." It may be helpful to think of redemptive history in three acts: 1) The Promise, 2) The Reality 3) The final Fulfillment.

Act One: The Promise

In the first chapters of the Bible, we read about man's rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ignored God's command and the first spots of sin's cancer began to grow. At this time, a promise was given. We find it in God's word to the serpent in Genesis 3:15.

And I will cause hostility between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring.
He will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.

The message was clear, there would be hostility between the lineage of Eve (human beings) and Satan (and the forces of darkness). God said one of the descendants of Eve would eventually strike the head of the serpent (a devastating wound) but Satan would only be able to land a minor wound on this "offspring." Jesus' death on the cross seemed to be fatal but it was just a glancing blow. When Jesus rose from the dead He delivered a devastating blow to Satan.

When it came time for Jacob to bless his twelve sons, he said to Judah,

¹⁰ The scepter will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from his descendants,
until the coming of the one to whom it belongs,
the one whom all nations will honor. (Genesis 49:10)

Specifically, God says the Messiah will come from the descendants of Judah. Throughout the history of Israel, the people waited with anticipation for this one who was to come from the line of Judah. When there were good times, hopes rose. When things were difficult, the people held on in the hope the difficulty would pass. They didn't understand that in the book of Genesis God was already pointing to Jesus.

When David came on the scene, the people swelled with hope. It was the pinnacle of the history of Israel. Even with the flaws we know David had, we are told that he was "a man after God's own heart." His victories in battle reminded people of the various promises made through the years. Yet, David confessed he was not the Messiah. Throughout the Psalms He pointed to someone other than Himself. In Psalm 22 we see a vivid picture of a suffering servant with pictures of the crucifixion of Jesus that are so specific they are uncanny. In Psalm 23, David talked about the Lord who would lead him through the valley of the shadow of death.

God promised David that one of His descendants would sit on the throne forever and ever. This was a clear picture of the One whose kingdom would never end; the one who would reign forever and ever as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

When we get to the time of the prophets, we start to get details about the birth of the promised one. Think about our anticipation of Christmas as children. In the olden days the old Sears Christmas Catalog would come out you knew Christmas was getting close. O how fun it was to circle all the things we would like to receive. Each of these prophecies was like the arrival of the Sears catalog—they reminded the people that the blessing they were waiting for was just around the corner.

In Isaiah 9:6-7 we read the familiar words.

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ His government and its peace
will never end.

He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.

The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen!

Lofty words. Who is this one who would be called Mighty God or Everlasting Father? Those words would have sounded like blasphemy to a true Israelite. Who could this one be?

In Isaiah 53 we read about the suffering servant. It is the stirring account, a precursor of the sacrifice of our Savior on our behalf. The idea of a wounded Messiah, a suffering servant, added more clues to who the Messiah would be but . . . it must have been very confusing to the Israelites; a mystery. The pieces certainly did not seem to fit. A powerful King and a suffering servant. As we look at Jesus from our perspective we can see how these texts complement each other

In Jeremiah 33:14-17 (at a particularly low period in Israel's history) God said through the prophet,

¹⁴ "The day will come, says the LORD, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them.

¹⁵ "In those days and at that time
I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David's line.
He will do what is just and right throughout the land.

¹⁶ In that day Judah will be saved,
and Jerusalem will live in safety.
And this will be its name:
'The LORD Is Our Righteousness.'

¹⁷ For this is what the LORD says: David will have a descendant sitting on the throne of Israel forever.

These prophecies show how important it was to show that Jesus was the son of David. The genealogies in Matthew and Luke are there to show that Jesus fulfills these prophecies. In the book of Daniel 7:13-14 there is another spectacular picture.

¹³ As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.

This is a bold picture of the triumphant One sent by God. Jesus often referred to Himself as the "Son of Man." We read this and think He was affirming His humanity. But he was not referring to himself as a human, he was referring to himself as the fulfillment of this passage in Daniel. When people understood this they charged Him with blasphemy.

It seemed like anytime the people began to waver in their faith, the Lord reminded them that He had not forgotten His promise even though it had been thousands of years since that first promise in Genesis.

Act 2 – the Birth of Jesus

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea in probably around 4-6 BC. (When they made modern calendars they made a mistake!) This promise was fulfilled in a stable outside in the back of an Inn. His birth fulfilled several very specific promises. In Isaiah 7:14 we read the familiar promise,

the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').

This was literally fulfilled when the angel came to Mary's home. Let's read the account from Luke 1:28-35

²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰ "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

³⁵ The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

This unmarried teenager was called to be the mother of the Son of God as He came as man. The words to Mary in verse 32, references Isaiah 9 "He will be great and be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David and he will reign forever." For a good Jew, this was unmistakable. The Messiah, the Promised One, was finally coming to save Israel, and Mary was going to be the mother of this Spirit-conceived child.

It was common knowledge that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. In Micah 5:2 it says,

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.

How could a woman from Nazareth fulfill this prophecy? God threw a change-up. Jesus was born in Bethlehem but the mother would not be a resident of Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem because of the tax decreed by the Emperor of Rome! This is also why everyone mocked the idea that Jesus could be the Messiah when he was revealed to be from Nazareth. The lesson to us is significant: don't read into prophetic passages more than what is said.

Jesus affirmed His own Messiahship when he stood up to read in the synagogue in His home town one day.

¹⁶ When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. ¹⁷ The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,
 for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
 that the blind will see,
 that the oppressed will be set free,
¹⁹ and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.”

²⁰ He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. ²¹ Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”

Of course, things did not go as the people expected for the Messiah. He did not throw off Rome. The unthinkable happened . . . this one the people believed was the promised Messiah was executed on a Roman cross!!! (Suddenly the words of Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 and the suffering servant come into view). But what about the eternal reign of Christ? How could He be the eternal Redeemer if He was dead?

Of course, that was answered three days later when Jesus rose from the dead. He explained to people that the only way our sin could be paid for was for Him to die in our place. Jesus was and is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who made it possible for us to stand before our Father as righteous individuals.

One of the wonders of Christmas is the reality that God had all of this planned long before the Jews were even a nation. In fact, the Jews were formed as a nation as part of God’s rescue plan for His creation. Biblical prophecy is one of the strongest arguments for Jesus being God in human form. God promised Him and sent Him just as He promised. He is our only hope for rescue from our sin addiction.

But there is a third act.

ACT 3

The first act was the promise, the second was the birth of Jesus, and the third will be the return of Christ. The idea of an eternal Kingdom with the eternal reign of Christ is still ahead of us.

Jesus talked about His return even before He died. And after His resurrection Jesus ascended into Heaven before the eyes of the disciples. In Acts 1:10-11 we read,

¹⁰ As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. ¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into

heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go.

The story of redemption continues. We, like Israel of old know there is a better day coming. Our full redemption is yet future. We know more of the story, but the rest story is still to be revealed. There is a lot of talk about the return Christ at present. Some people make it sound like they know exactly how it is going to happen. However, they are going beyond what the Bible actually says (which is foolish and perhaps reckless). The point is that as we celebrate Christmas we remember God becoming man. But, we should also be remembering that Act 3 is still to come.

As we approach another Christmas, it is important we learn from what God has done in the past. **First**, we need to realize that God holds all of history in His hands. He orchestrated the events of history to bring about the first coming of Christ. He will also orchestrate the events of history to bring about the second coming of Christ. God is not hoping we can make all of this happen. It is all a matter of His purpose and timing. God does what He promises to do! He promises to take us to Heaven; to judge the wicked and unrepentant; and to vindicate us. Christmas is not the end of the story. It is only the end of the beginning of the story!

Second, we should not be discouraged by the delay in his second coming. There are those who scoff at the idea of the return of Christ because, they say, "it has been over 2000 years". People waited for the fulfillment of the promise for several thousand years between Eden and Bethlehem. We must not lose focus as we wait for Act 3 of the redemption story. God's delay does not diminish His promise.

Third, just as there were pieces of prophecy that did not seem to fit and at times even may have seemed to have contradicted other prophecies of His birth, we likewise should hold all of God's promises about the second coming and wait to see how they fit together. We should be hesitant to say the Second Coming of Jesus is going to happen a certain way. The leaders of Israel thought they too had it all figured out, and they missed the Messiah and even put Him to death! Jesus tells us to watch and to wait. He didn't tell us to try to figure it all out. I don't understand all the images of the Book of Revelation, but I know when He comes all those things will make perfect sense and we will marvel at the plan and specifics of the promises of God.

Finally, God has been faithful regarding all His promises about the coming and second coming of the Lord. Since God has been shown trustworthy with His redemptive promises, we know He will be faithful in every other promise He made.

It may seem like God has forgotten His promise to be with us always, or work all things for good, or give us the strength and the words to say in tough situations. We may wonder if He can be trusted to bring life after death as we near the end of our lives. Learn a lesson from the three acts of redemption . . . God does exactly what He promises to do. Always. There is no need to despair or panic . . . His timing is as perfect as His Word is true.