

Philippians 1:3-11 – Prepare for the day of God's work completed in us

Paul is joyful praying for the Philippians, seeing God's eternal purpose for them.

1 I thank my God every time I remember you.

"I thank my God" – Paul writes under close guard, but is joyful for what God is doing among others.

4-6 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the Day of Christ Jesus.

"Day of Christ Jesus" – His return. God (the Holy Spirit) initiates salvation to eternal life, and goes on sanctifying us, towards its conclusion on this future day. This eternal timescale is in view for Paul.

For further study, read Phil 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:2–11; 2 Pet. 3:10–13; Rev. 20:11–21:8)

7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

"In chains or... confirming the gospel" – the Philippians stood with Paul and supported him practically and financially, despite the stigma of imprisonment in their culture. Paul's ability to

IN PRACTICE God's timescales can be difficult for us in a world where we are used to things being 'instant'. Having to wait is challenging. The waiting for Jesus' return that the Early Church seemed to measure in years, is counted for us in millennia. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the good work begun by the Lord is taking a long time to bring to anything like completion: the world has got bigger and vastly more complex. However, the message of this epistle is to have faith in God for all the loose ends that we see. He will bring to completion the good work that He has started, in us personally, the mission of His church – and in the bringing about of a just world order.

QUESTION *What does it look like, to be filled with the fruit of righteousness?*

PRAYER Lord, we want Your glorious return but we are so unprepared. Teach us to wait actively, willingly putting right with You those traits which have no place in Your presence. Amen.

"defend and confirm the gospel" has been curtailed by imprisonment, but his perspective is that God is nevertheless "carrying on" the "good work" that He began. God always completes what He starts.

8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,

"Love may abound... in knowledge and... insight" – knowing God's will and so able to shift from our immediate judgments to the bigger picture of what God, in His unconditional love, is doing in others.

10-11 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

"Pure and blameless" – what will be found in us on the day of Christ's return? Harboursing wrong attitudes, especially the judgmental or resentful kind, will bring the Lord's censure – we are commanded to forgive, to treat people better than they deserve and to love – just as God does with us.

"The fruit of righteousness" – not achieved by any amount of our effort or discipline. Rather, being yielded to the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to grow righteousness in us, from the inside out.

The Living Word

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The Bible readings for Sunday, Dec. 9, 2018, with commentary notes

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, December 9**, in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **Advent ABCD: Be prepared – for Christ's glorious return**

Luke 1:68-79 – Praise for God's plan of mighty salvation

Malachi 3:1-4 – A messenger will prepare the way for the Lord

Luke 3:1-6 – God's word to John is to preach repentance

Philippians 1:3-11 – Prepare for the day of God's work completed in us

SUMMARY The messenger of the Lord will prepare the way and then suddenly the Lord, the Refiner, will come. The word comes to John son of Zechariah, to prepare the way by preaching change. Christians in the Early Church are reminded that God's work in us is a 'work in progress', with its completion date the Day of Christ Jesus.

Luke 1:68-79 – Zechariah's praise for God's plan of mighty salvation

Zechariah's prophetic song over the forerunner, John

the promise that was about the people of the land.

68 "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has come to His people and redeemed them.

74-75 and to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

"Praise be" – Benedictus in the Latin translation.

"His people... redeemed" – Zechariah is correct about the Jewish people, but without the perspective of God's desire for inclusive salvation, Luke 3:6.

"Rescue us" – the people of Israel sought freedom from the Romans. God's plan through Jesus was spiritual freedom from sin, Satan and death.

69-71 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us...

76-77 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him, to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,

"Horn" – of a powerful animal, so 'mighty salvation'

72-73 ...to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

"My child... a prophet" – at this dedication, Zechariah prophesies over John, last of the OT prophets, called by Jesus the greatest, Luke 7:28.

"His Holy covenant... to Abraham" – the part of

78-79 because of the tender mercy of

our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

"Rising sun" — the Messiah is described as dispelling darkness, Isa. 9:2, 60:1; Mal. 4:2-5.

"Path of peace" — or the way of the Lord: God's purpose is people finding peace with God through faith in Christ Jesus, Romans 5:1.

Malachi 3:1-4 – A messenger will prepare the way for the Lord

When Christ appears He will come to refine and purify

1 "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.

"My messenger" — a play on the name Malachi. This messenger is Isaiah's "voice in the wilderness", Isa. 40:3 which the NT understands as the 'Elijah' of Malachi 4:3, the role which John the Baptist fulfilled. It was customary in that culture for a king to send ahead a messenger to address obstacles to their visit. John urged people to repent and prepare themselves for the greater Messenger to come.

For further study, read Matt. 3:3, 11:14, 17:10-13; John 1:14-17

2 But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He

appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

"The day of His coming" — a picture of judgment and also purifying. The launderer's work with lye soap and beating with sticks was not gentle; neither was the heat needed to raise the dross of impurities from molten metal.

3-4 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

"Purify the Levites" — the term messenger was usually applied to prophets and priests — and the priestly class of the Levites, who were supposed to be an example in serving at the altar, will be purged of their unfaithfulness.

IN PRACTICE Malachi's message here about the Lord and messenger of the covenant focuses on the refining and purifying aspect, particular for its guardians, the priests and Levites. Bring that into today and the NT reminds us, James 3:1, that teachers will be judged more harshly. For those given privilege and responsibility, more is expected, Luke 12:38. The priests and religious leaders of Jesus' time were not proclaiming God's purpose but thwarting it.

Jesus is poised to come again, and the more that reality becomes clear, the more it is plain that He simply wants His Church back. He wants it to be His church, holding His values and proclaiming the unashamed message to the various empires of man, that He is the way to salvation into the kingdom of God.

Creating our own version of temple and priesthood may be more accessible for us — but it's not what He had in mind. It's not the New Covenant way of knowing God that the Early Church began to work out.

Our honouring His first coming, and preparing ourselves for His return, must involve pruning back what doesn't belong, to reveal a church that Jesus will recognise.

QUESTION *What simple changes would make your church more Jesus-like?*

Luke 3:1-6 – God's word to John is to preach repentance

He is Isaiah's prophesied voice in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord'

1-2 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar — when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracōnitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene — during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

"Herod tetrarch of Galilee" — When Herod the Great died in 4 BC his three sons succeeded him with Lysanias as tetrarchs ruling quarters of his former kingdom overseen by Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

"Preaching a baptism of repentance" — John heralded the coming Messiah saying that people needed to repent of their sins and prepare spiritually; the response being water baptism.

4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

"Prepare the way" — before a royal visit, workers would clear and level the road. The quotation from Isaiah 40:3-5 was associated with the Jews' return

IN PRACTICE Luke's picture of John, the prophetic voice in the wilderness of Isaiah 40, is a call for us to be prepared for the expected order to be upset.

The Jews expected their Messiah to come and deliver them, as their entitlement. Similarly we think of our church attendance and charitable actions, and feel we should be the ones lining the way for the royal visit.

God often does things differently from our expectations. In recent years there have been increasing testimonies of how God shocks people that don't really know Him, with His love. We have been challenged by His perplexing grace to those we consider rather undeserving as we hear stories of prisoners in jail receiving Jesus, and Muslims of harsh views having visions of the Lord.

This gospel passage emphasises our being prepared for His return in expecting — and praying for — people who are not like us, to begin to see His salvation.

QUESTION *Who, in our world and culture, are to us like the 'Gentiles' that Jews of Jesus' time struggled to accept as a focus of His salvation?*

from exile, Ezra 1-2, and end-times salvation.

5 "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.

"Every valley... filled in" — a poetic way of saying the Lord's purpose will not be thwarted. There are also moral overtones. The humble and lowly are to be built up, the crooked changed, and the proud and arrogant, particular obstacles to God's purposes, will be humbled.

6 "And all people will see God's salvation."

"All people" — Luke's gospel was written with Gentile believers in mind. Only Luke, of the four gospel accounts, takes the Isaiah 40:3 quotation further: "...the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together." It took till the Council of Jerusalem, 20 years after the Resurrection, for this to be recognised, Acts 15, Gal. 2.

"All... will see God's salvation" — God's intention for His covenant people to act as a model of righteousness, 'light', to the nations around them was clearly set out by Isaiah, Isa. 42:6 and 49:6: "The Servant... is called... to be a light for the Gentiles..." etc. The purifying of the Levites, Mal. 3:3, addresses their failure to grasp this important widening of the mission of God.