

“If Christmas came tomorrow, would you be ready?” This question was asked in an ad in Albuquerque in 1920. Early Christmas ads and promotions have been around for a long time. The “Shop Early Campaign” was launched during WW1 to call for a halt to the “inhuman nature of the eleventh-hour rush” on salesclerks. This was in response to the labor shortage because of the war. The campaign urged Americans to “Take the crush out of your Christmas shopping and put it into winning the War.”

With only 16 days to go, how ready are you for Christmas? You may have a list of things to do that is overwhelming. We can put so much pressure on ourselves to get the decorations, the gifts, the food and the travel right that we miss the whole point of Christmas. We need to take the time to make the right preparations to celebrate Jesus’ birth and to be ready for His return.

If you think that a few months of Christmas prep is a lot, try about 700 years. Isaiah was God’s prophet to the kings of Judah about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. The nation was in crisis as foreign powers threatened to invade the land. Isaiah was sent to offer a sign of hope from God to the people. Isaiah didn’t tell them that God was going to give them more horses or chariots, more swords and spears to turn back the invasion. **Instead Isaiah gave the sign of a baby. Isaiah told the kings and the people:**

- ***Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*** (7:14)
- ***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*** (9:6)

Babies make terrible warriors. But they do represent hope, which was in short supply in Isaiah’s day. Isaiah looked forward to a time when God’s king would come to the throne. Isaiah’s ad was answered in Bethlehem when an angel of the Lord told the good news to the shepherds. ***“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”*** (Luke 2:11)

Waiting 700 years left plenty of time for people to come up with their own expectations. No one expected the Promised Savior to come like He did. Jesus was born in a stable, not a palace. He was from a poor and at least temporarily homeless family. Instead of wearing royal robes, he learned the carpenter’s trade. When he started preaching he didn’t tell the people to grab their swords and start a revolution. He told them to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them. The people expected a king to rule from a throne, not one to die on a cross.

Jesus can challenge our expectations as well. Sometimes we expect Jesus to be the miracle worker who will answer all of our prayers by giving us everything we ask for. Instead Jesus tells us to repent, believe the Good News and trust Him. We expect the Christian life to be easy. But Jesus says that following Him means taking up our cross and suffering for our faith. Jesus challenges us to make the right preparations to celebrate His birth. Instead of focusing on gifts we give and receive, we need to focus on the gift of God's Son, the gift He wants us to give to others.

So what are those gifts? A closer look at Isaiah 9 shows us Jesus was everything advertised.

Jesus brings light. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, ***"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."*** (vs. 2) The nation that had been threatened by invasion at the time of Isaiah had been conquered and occupied by the Romans before Jesus' birth. On top of that, it had been 400 years since God had sent a prophet to speak for Him to the people. Those were dark days. But the darkness was broken when Jesus was born. The Gospel of John says this about Jesus, ***"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*** (John 1:4-5) That same light of Jesus' love shines in the darkness that can enter our lives.

Isaiah said the promised Savior would bring joy to the nation. The Christmas gifts we get may make us happy for a little while. But that happiness fades when the gift is consumed or an updated product comes on the market or the gift is set aside and forgotten. But the joy of the Lord lasts forever. Jesus came to give us full and complete joy. The Holy Spirit works to bring joy in our lives. Our joy comes from knowing that no matter what circumstances we face, God is with us and God is for us.

Jesus also brings justice. Isaiah wrote, ***"You have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor."*** (vs. 4) The people may have expected liberation from the threatening or oppressing nation. Jesus came to defeat the real oppressors called sin and death. God's justice demands that the price for sin be paid in full. Jesus took sin and death on by dying on the cross and rising to new life. The Apostle Paul wrote, ***"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*** (1 Cor. 15:55-57)

Jesus really is the "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" the Prophet Isaiah promised. The first Christmas was only the beginning. Jesus' life, death and resurrection ushered in a new age with God's people looking forward to the day when God's kingdom would completely come, when sin and death are defeated forever. God promises to make all things new. It's never too early for us to get ready!