

The Unique Christ: The Unique Signs of Christ
By Jason Huff
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Luke 1:39-56; Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:21-38

Our final Scripture reading today is Luke 2:21-38. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Have you ever missed your exit because there were so many billboards along the way that you missed the sign that told you it was time to get off the interstate? I have. Signs are everywhere. We’re used to ignoring a lot of signs because they’re meaningless to us; if we didn’t shut them out, we’d couldn’t process everything they were trying to tell us and sell us. (I remember on our first trip to the Great Smoky Mountains being so overwhelmed by all the billboards in Pigeon Forge that I was ready to turn around!)

But signs play an incredibly important role in our daily lives. Our body gives us signs – time to rest, time to eat, time see the doctor. Our car gives us signs – it needs gas, it needs oil, it needs air in the tires. There are a lot of signs we’re right to ignore; just because someone sends me a postcard saying they’d like to talk to me about my car’s extended warranty doesn’t mean I should pay attention to it. But we ignore important signs at our own peril. Stop. Yield. Caution. Warning. All signs we need to know. I don’t remember very much from my journey to Russia 25 years ago, but I do specifically remember one phrase that was really important: Ostaroshna – dieza crivietza. Which means, “Warning, the doors are closing,” which is super important to know when you’re squished like bugs into the Moscow subway. When a sign is really crucial, really urgent, we can remember it even if it’s in a foreign language.

As we continue our Advent series talking about the uniqueness of Christ, particularly as it relates to His first coming, we're going to talk today about the unique signs surrounding Jesus. Jesus did not come into the world and just announce, "Hey, I'm Jesus, the Messiah!" In fact, during His earthly ministry, He kept His true nature a secret so that people who learn it from what He did and accomplished rather than mere words. But the signs surrounding Jesus are also a convincing proof of His truly being the long-awaited Savior. Perhaps what's most moving about the signs surrounding Jesus is that the most poignant ones are the signs over which He had no personal human control. They work to convince us that Jesus was not a flash-in-the-pan or a deluded rabbi, but the Son of God come to us.

There are three types of signs we're going to talk about – the prophetic, the foreign, and the personal. All three types point to Jesus alone as the promised Christ, but each unique group of signs has something different to say to us, something important for us to remember this Christmas. Each type of sign reminds us of just how glorious and awesome our God truly is.

Let's start with the prophetic signs. From ages past, the Messiah was promised. From Genesis 3 all the way to the days of Jesus, there were signs that God was going to send a redeemer upon the earth. But these signs came at different times and different ways to different prophets. What's amazing is how consistently the prophecies point to Jesus.

Take into account the birth and lineage of Christ. The Christ was to be born of Abraham's people and David's line – and keep in mind that because of the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and all its historical records, Jesus was in the last two generations that could prove their lineage back to David. He would be born of a virgin. He was to be born in Bethlehem, a hamlet of virtually no account in the shadow of Jerusalem just six miles away. "Kings" or "wise men" from other nations would come at his birth. Most of these prophecies dated between four hundred and a thousand years before Jesus.

But the prophecies continue. The Messiah would be a prophet like Moses with the teaching authority of Moses. He would minister in Galilee (not Jerusalem as some would expect). His teachings would be rejected, but those who would believe in Him would be both Jews and Gentiles alike. He would triumphantly enter Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey.

He would be falsely accused, betrayed, and mocked. And while the world did not know of crucifixion a thousand years before the Romans, and while even then crucifixion didn't normally include nailing the victim to the cross. Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 accurately describe His trial, crucifixion, and death as they happened. Even the fact that Jesus' bones were not broken – a common practice to bring about the death of crucifixion victims more quickly – was prophesied.

His resurrection was also promised. The Psalmist stated that His body would not see decay. Isaiah 53 teaches that the messiah that pours himself out to death will see the light of life and be satisfied, that he will bear the sins of many, and he will have a portion, recognition, among the great. All of this, centuries before Jesus. Other religions have prophets and prophecies, but absolutely nothing like the promise of Jesus.

What this speaks to us is this: *in prophecy, God shows us His patient, eternal plan for our rescue through His Son.* In a day when our faith is waning, we might say, “Is all of this just made up? Did the disciples write the stories of Jesus to fit what they wanted to fit?” The short answer is no, they didn’t. These prophecies were told long before Jesus came into the picture. And when you read the prophecies for yourselves, most of them are clear as day.

A few years ago, we did a video Bible study led by four Jewish scholars who had become Christians through their study of Isaiah 53. It was so clear to them, so plain that the passage was talking about Jesus, that it cut through all the arguments they had heard from their rabbis before about why Jesus wasn’t the Messiah. These were not random people but those who had carefully studied the Hebrew Scriptures. It was clear to them that God had laid out His plan long ago, that Jesus had fulfilled it, and they needed God to give them the eyes to see it themselves.

What does this mean for us? *It means that God has planned for our salvation since the beginning of the world.* He has cared for you long before you ever came to be. It means that God keeps His promises throughout the generations – promises we read in Jesus’ era for believers still hold true today. It means you can count on God because He has the affairs of the world sorted out.

We look around and see chaos, and it’s true, sin has thrown our universe into chaos. But nothing surprises God; nothing is a catastrophe beyond repair to God. You have nothing to fear as a believer in Christ because God has you. That doesn’t mean we act recklessly or foolishly. What it means is that so many things we fear in life don’t need to make us afraid. If the government falls apart, who is in charge? God. If I get sick, who is in charge? God. If I lose my job or my house or my car, who is in charge? God. God has planned for the salvation of all who believe and trust in His Son Jesus. You can rely on this truth because God spells it out for us in His Word from ages past, though many different prophets speaking the same message. You can take heart – the signs show God has always been planning for His messiah.

Now let’s look at the foreign signs for a messiah. You might remember that a year or two ago, we looked at the prophecy of Balaam, the infamous prophet hired to bring down curses on Israel who wound up by the Holy Spirit blessing Israel and even proclaiming truths about the Messiah to come. As wayward as Balaam was, God used him as a mouthpiece to speak truth to Israel’s enemies. Over time, God used foreign powers to bless His people. Signs given by God to those outside God’s Jewish covenant community aren’t impossible.

But the foreign sign all of us think of when it comes to the birth of Jesus is the mysterious star that signals to wealthy foreign magi that the king of the Jews has been born. The wise men’s story is in fact unique and surprising. The Old Testament knows nothing about a star in the skies pointing the way to the birthplace of the messiah. God forbid His people to use astrology and star charts to try and figure out the future; He wanted them to rely on Him and not on the position of this or that constellation. The Jewish distaste for astrology – as well as foreigners claiming to know anything about their religion – is probably why the magi travel alone to Bethlehem without so much as a guide. It’s most likely that no one really believed them.

So why would they come all the way to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem, on nothing more than a bright light in the sky? (On December 21, there's going to be a conjunction between Jupiter and Saturn that astronomers call the "Christmas Star," and we can't help but wonder if it's something like that the magi followed.) Who would bring the kind of expensive gifts that the wise men brought, worth thousands of dollars in our thinking, traveling several hundred miles?

We must remember that this sort of thinking was common in the ancient, pagan world. Comets were portents of disaster; conjunctions meant the rising and falling of world powers, kings and princes. The Romans believed Julius Caesar's death was predicted by a comet, and Nero was so spooked by comets during his reign, he had political rivals killed to make sure the comets weren't predicting someone else taking his throne. We might not take them seriously; the Jewish people wanted nothing to do with it; but the ancient world absolutely did. God used the phenomena the ancients recognized to steer these God-fearing men toward the truth.

What's this mean for us? *Through Jesus, God has brought every nation and people to Himself in a way we can understand.* The signs to those outside the covenant community of Israel showed that God meant for all people to know His grace and love, to follow in His ways and to become more like Him. His love was not limited to the Hebrews, even though He had made them His chosen people. In Jesus, we have a Messiah not just for a certain segment of humanity, a privileged few, but all who would turn to Him in faith and trust for forgiveness of their sins and the promise of new life.

This makes Jesus truly unique. The Roman Empire kept peace through force, not through love for one another. In Jesus' era, Israel hated being under Rome's thumb, hated Romans, hated Samaritans, and had an uncomfortable relationship with everyone else. It was unthinkable that the Messiah promised to Israel would be the Messiah of the entire world. And yet, that's exactly the case. In Jesus, the world finds redemption. The signs to those outside Israel show that God was making good His promise that in the Messiah the nations would find their hope.

It also means that we are a part of that rescue plan. Your race, your background, your former way of life with its sins, none of it matters to God. The faithful, those who believe and trust in Christ for salvation, we are accepted no matter our history. From the corporate towers to the Appalachian hollers, from the frozen depths to the tropics, from one side of the world to the other, God has made salvation known through His son. Wherever you are today, whatever you might think is keeping you from placing faith and trust in Jesus, know that He has come for you. He sent a sign to the most unlikely of visitors to His Son's birth. He has a place for you too.

We've talked about the prophetic and foreign signs of Christ's coming. Let's move to the personal signs. When I say personal, I mean the signs that God gave to specific individuals at the time of His arrival. Obviously, the prophets of ages past were given revelations themselves, but the personal signs near to Jesus' birth are direct, more about what is now happening rather than what is to come. We have the angel appearing to Mary, of course. Joseph has a vision of an angel in a dream. Elizabeth feels her baby, who will grow up to be John the Baptist, kicking at the arrival of Mary, and Elizabeth immediately knows she is carrying the Messiah. These are the stories we often hear about at Christmas because all of them relate directly to the family of Jesus and how they dealt with the news. Even the message to the shepherds was personal.

And we never want to forget Anna and Simeon. It's easy to ignore them. They only show up in Luke's gospel, mentioned only once. They are not what you might call "essential workers" in the story of salvation. They don't become apostles or disciples; in fact, by the details, they didn't live much past this story. The one thing that stands out about Simeon and Anna is that they are both devout. They longed for the day of the Messiah. They were faithful people. And on the same day, by the Holy Spirit's prompting they both recognized the infant Jesus was in fact the promised Christ. They both speak words of truth and wisdom and prophecy over Him. They can die in peace, having seen the Lord's salvation with their own eyes.

What I love about all these personal signs is that they interconnect with one another. We aren't asked to believe based on one person's word, on an individual vision. We have different people, different places and times, different mindsets, all speaking to the one truth: this babe is the infant Lord meant to save us. We should all be wary of a prophet who speaks on his own accord, with no one but his own voice approving of his message. But all of these personal signs come together in a chorus of voices giving weight to the truth. And again, this makes Jesus unique because while any person can write a prophecy, it is something entirely different for so many divergent people to come together with the same message.

Again, though, how should this speak to me? I see for us a message of hope: *God is a personal God who loves us individually and speaks to us personally.* When the ancient Jews spoke of God as Father, they only did so as the Father of Israel the nation. They would never speak of God as a personal Father. But Jesus did, and Jesus encouraged us to do so too, to speak to Him as a kind, loving, caring Father deeply concerned about our well-being and our becoming like Him for our own good.

God sent very personal signs and messages and messengers to His people throughout history, but it's even more apparent when we look at Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon and Elizabeth. And since God has sent His Holy Spirit to us, since we have God with us always, it means that God is still speaking personally to us. Through His Word, through prayer, through that still small voice, God is communicating with us.

In these days of COVID when it is easy to live in fear and isolation, to think that no one out there loves you or cares for you, let me assure you – God does. Even when we in the church mess up, don't call or check in as often as we should, God loves you. God knows you personally because He made you personally. He speaks into your heart the truth of His Son Jesus in a way that, if you're willing to listen, you'll understand. I am always amazed to read in the Scripture that every hair on our heads is numbered by God – that's how intimately He knows us!

These personal signs for the people God revealed His plan to...they show that God works in small and simple ways, not through the powerful so often as through the humble and the meek. We do not need to be famous or fabulous or sinless to be noticed by God. Shepherds were thought to be the dregs of humanity. Foreign astrologers had no standing in Israel. A young pregnant girl, a couple old folks who hung around the temple, whoever would listen to these people? Yet God spoke to them, and He's willing to speak to you, personally, as you have ears to listen.

Next week, we'll talk about the unique coming of Christ as a child. But this week, I invite us to dig deep into the story and contemplate the signs that Jesus was the promised Messiah. When we look at them all – the word of the ancient prophets, the testimony of the foreigners, the personal messages sent to a waiting world – I believe we'll have renewed faith in this God who has planned from the beginning to renew and redeem this world through the Son He loves and sent so that we might have a personal relationship with Him.