

Question: Why might Jesus fulfilling prophecy be important?

If there is one aspect of sharing the Christian faith, and having confidence in your faith, that every Christian should know, is something of how Jesus fulfilled prophecy. But first what is prophecy and why is it important? In the generic and public sense of the word that most people would understand is a telling of things that will happen in the future. In a Biblical sense this is not always the case.

Prophecy, Biblically, is used in three particular ways. Firstly, it outlines possible outcomes, depending on how the people or a nation responded to God's Word preached to them. We see this in the Book of Jonah. Ninevah's destruction was prophesied *if* the city did not repent and turn to the Lord. In Jonah 3 we see that, from the king down, the people repented in sackcloth and ashes, terrified God would destroy their kingdom. In the face of this God had compassion on Ninevah and relented. Interestingly, if you know the narrative, Jonah was angry with God because God didn't destroy Ninevah as the Ninevites were enemies of the Jewish people and had through history, treated them cruelly. Jonah also felt he looked bad because his "prophecy" didn't come true. Clearly, Jonah had expected the people wouldn't repent and he would rejoice at seeing the negative prophecy fulfilled; not quite what God had in mind.

Secondly, prophecy was used about very specific about things what *would* happen in the future, as in the case of the king of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in the Book of Daniel. Short story version: After having interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, without being told what the dream was, Daniel was promoted to second in the kingdom. Under his guidance and God's blessing the kingdom flourished. Nebuchadnezzar saw it as all about himself and his arrogance grew until he considered himself a god. In a dream, which Daniel again interpreted, Nebuchadnezzar was told that he would **"be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules."** (*Daniel 4:25ff*) This happened because Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was greater than the message or the sender. A Babylonian tablet of the time, an historical Babylonian artefact (Tablet BM34113), records that Nebuchadnezzar suffered mental health issues but little detail. What an understatement. If it wasn't for Daniel, an usurper would have taken the throne during this time but no, it was God's intent that a wiser Nebuchadnezzar would return to his throne once he acknowledged God, as he did and was restored. Here prophecy was explicit and carried out.

The third type of prophecy is that in which we are given God's perspective, such as classically in Isaiah 55:8-9, "**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.**" or from Isaiah 59:1-2, "**Behold, Yahweh's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor his**

ear dull that it can't hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that He will not hear."

When we come to Jesus, His life and mission, we have something astounding, we have dozens of specific prophecies about Jesus' life and death. Theologian John Statt sees the prophecies about Jesus as the greatest evidence of Jesus' divinity. Now we need to stress here that in the lifetime of humanity, with all our cultures, generations, religions and sciences there is no equivalent to specific prophecies like this anywhere! Yes, there are multiple quite generic, some even specific, predictions about the end of the world. These come from a wider range of religions and so-called prophets across the world. Yet they are less than convincing and many have been dramatically wrong. There have been a number of "predictions" about technological developments that are not so much "prophecies" as extrapolations about where science could logically go. We have, for example, Leonardo Da Vinci's wonderful machines that predicted helicopters, tanks, submarines, parachutes and even compasses. Only years of research actually made these predictions into realities, but Da Vinci could see where the technology was going even if he didn't have the tools to construct it. This is not prophecy but extrapolation, based on knowledge and research and a creative mind exploring what is possible. In contrast, God wants us to know what is coming, what God has planned, and what He is doing through history. As the prophet Amos observed, **"Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets".**

With God prophecy is explicit, especially when it comes to Jesus. Before we look at a number of specific examples, consider this: The prophecies related to Jesus' birth, life, work and death are from the Old Testament. That is, the prophecies are from the Hebrew scriptures. All these works were completed and distributed well prior to Jesus' birth. Essentially the Hebrew versions were completed by the 5th Century BCE and the Greek (Septuagint) translation formally compiled by the late first century.

Let's look then at some of the prophetic material around Jesus. Considering Jesus' birth, we recognise the obvious – that's one thing that Jesus had no control over. You cannot control your own birth; your parents, your birth's timing or location. Nor can you control your own death by another's hand. Let alone a whole host of things through your life. So taking just a small selection of the prophecies let's look at what is prophesied about Jesus. First, let's start with His birth. We are told :

- Jesus would be of the lines of Abraham, Isaac, Judah – Gen 26:3-4, 17:7-8, 19, 21:12, 26:2-4, 28:13-14, 49:8-10, Micah 5:2.
- Jesus would be of the line of David – 2 Sam 7:12-13, Isaiah 9:7, Jere 2:3-5, 30:9
- He would be a first-born son – Exodus 13:2, Numbers 3:13, 8:17
- He would be born of a virgin – Isaiah 7:13-14
- He would be born in Bethlehem of Judea (Judah) - Micah 5:2-5
- He would be born after the return from exile and before the destruction of Jerusalem - Daniel 9:2
- Kings would bring gifts and lay down before him – Psalm 72:10-11
- A massacre of children would follow his birth – Jeremiah 31:15
- Jesus would be called out of Egypt – Hosea 11:1 – meaning He had to go there from Bethlehem His place of birth.

As we know Jesus was of the lines of Abraham, Isaac and Judah and was a son of David. He was the first-born son of the young virgin Mary and Joseph. Kings (sages, astrologers or wise men of the East, all of the same term) attended his birth bearing gifts of great value. The despot Herod led a massacre of all children under two in the region determined to destroy a potential threat. Some of these things are more generic, such as the lineage, but the specificity of Bethlehem is surprising given Bethlehem was generally considered quite insignificant. That Messiah would be born of a virgin, that kings would bring gifts and bow down before him and that a massacre of children would follow is not something one might easily think up. Let alone that Jesus and His family would flee to Egypt and return when the angel of the Lord told Joseph it was safe to do so. The detail is amazing given so much of it was recorded hundreds of years in advance.

When we turn to Jesus' life and ministry we find a similar pattern. Again just a few ...

- He would have a herald go before Him preparing for His coming – Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6. We know this would turn out to be John the Baptiser.
- The Spirit of the Lord would rest on Him – Isaiah 11:2, 42:1; 61:1-2
- He would be hated without reason - Psalm 35:19, 64:4
- He would be rejected by His own people – Ps 69:8, 118:22-23
- He would care for the poor and needy – Psalm 72:12-14
- His ministry would be in Zebulun, Naphtali and Galilee – Isaiah 9:1-2
- He would heal the deaf, the blind and the lame – Isaiah 29:18:35:5
- He would call those not His own people (Gentiles) – Isaiah 55:4-5; 60:1-3, Hosea 2:23
- Preach liberty to captives – Isaiah 61:1-2a
- He would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey – Zechariah 9:9

Again here, in this block, we can see a number of things that were pretty much unique in their collective: hatred by his own people, his ministry of care and miracles, and His calling of the Gentile nations. That this individual would also ride into Jerusalem on a donkey is also quite astounding. Ruling conquerors, such as Judas Maccabeus and the Ceasars, rode into the towns they conquered on large white stallions not small donkeys.

By far however, the greatest collection of prophecies are about Jesus' last days on earth; His betrayal and the details of His death and what would follow. Let's look, not at the theological statements about His death and what it achieved but at the simple details of the physical events. Here we have an incredible level detail about Jesus the Messiah in His final days:

- He would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver – Zechariah 11:12
 - Betrayed by a friend – Psalm 41:9, 55:12-14
 - The thirty pieces of silver would later buy the potters field – Zech 11:12-13
- He would be accused by false witness – Psalm 27:12; 35:11
 - He would be accused but not respond – Isaiah 53:7
- His friends would stand afar off (abandon Him) - Psalm 38:11, 88:18
- He would be struck on the head – Micah 5:1
- He would be beaten and spat on – Isaiah 50:6

- So badly wounded he would be hardly recognisable – Isaiah 52:14 – a result of the lashing by a Roman cat of nine tails designed to strip flesh. Highly unusual to receive this punishment and crucifixion – it was normally one or the other.
- He would be mocked and insulted – Psalm 22:7-8, 17
- He would be hung on a tree as a curse for us – Deuteronomy 21:23
- Lifted up as Moses lifted a serpent – Numbers 21:8-9
- He would feel forsaken by God – Psalm 22:1
- His feet and hands would be pierced – Zechariah 12:10, Psalm 22:16
- Be thirsty during His crucifixion – Psalm 22:15; 69:21
- Soldiers would cast lots for His cloak – Psalm 22:18
- He would be given gal and vinegar to drink – Psalm 69:20-22
- His body would be pierced – Zechariah 13:7
- He would be buried with the rich – Isaiah 53:9
- He would be resurrected on the third - Psalm 16:8-11; 49:15; 86:13, Isaiah 53:10-11, Hosea 6:1-2 (and parallels with Jonah 1:17 & 2)

All of this makes a very simple point but one every Christian should know and be able to discuss ... God has laid out His plan and intent for the world very clearly and it has not changed in thousands of years. The pivot point of all of this is Jesus. That's why there are so many prophecies about Him that He fulfilled so that we could be sure about our faith and sure about what He would and did teach. As we stated before there is no other text or series of texts like this in all of human history other than the Biblical record. The importance of what we have here is vast. The prophecies validate Jesus.

If we can see Jesus has fulfilled so many prophecies exactly as they were given, what does that mean for the prophecies as yet unfulfilled? Surely, we have to have confidence that they too will be fulfilled, especially when it comes to prophecy about Jesus. Historic reliability encourages us to have faith for part 2.

We are reminded here that the Scriptures depict two roles of the Messiah, something that many of the Jewish leadership of Jesus' day failed to recognise. The Messiah would come twice, first at the Suffering Servant to die for the sin of the world. He would be the Man of Sorrows who would suffer and die on the cross. But then, resurrected, in God's good time and God's alone, He would return as the Glorious and all-conquering King to establish His reign firstly on earth and then in eternity. His throne, established forever by His sacrifice and death, He would now fill.

It is worth taking a moment to consider these prophecies because they are important to us who may well live through some or all of them:

From the Old Testament:

- Jesus' return is preceded by the Prophet Elijah – Malachi 4:5
- Daniel 7:13-14 gives us a picture of the resurrected Jesus being given all authority and power and returning to the earth in the clouds
- Zechariah 12:10 and 14:4 depict Jesus standing on the Mount of Olives and the Hebrew people mourning the One they had pierced.

- It will also be a time of judgement for the nations: Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 30:3, 18; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:14; Amos 5:18-20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7, 14-15; Zechariah 14:1
- It speaks with a stark imagery such as Joel 2:31, “**The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.**”

In the New Testament, Jesus depicts the time of and following His return even more starkly:

- Matthew 24:30-31 is a good example. Jesus said, “**Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.**”
- In Matthew 25 Jesus spoke of the necessity to be ready for His return in the parable of the Ten Virgins. Some of these were lazy about their tasks and missed out when the bridegroom appeared. Jesus continued to then speak about the final judgement in the imagery of the separation of the sheep and the goats. All in the certainty that such events would occur following His return.

Many other New Testament writers tell us more about this time, of the Millennial Kingdom, the final opportunities to repent, the rise of Satan’s last efforts to thwart God’s plan, and Satan’s final demise and much more, but we do not have time to go into this today.

What we can be certain of is that God has, through prophecy, quite deliberately revealed His Hand throughout human history but never more starkly than when it comes to Jesus Christ. It stands to reason that when the evidence is so compelling, so far, we can be sure what is prophesied to follow will happen. But even more importantly, it should make us aware that there are many people we know, in our families, amongst our friends and colleagues who do not know Jesus and what is going to happen. Not only that, they are missing out in the life they can have with Jesus and in His community right now. It is our task to share this Good News with them. Knowing that God is faithful to His Word, that His love and grace call out to all of us to repent and come to Him and enjoy all He has to offer should be an encouragement to us to get on with the task. Prophecy is a wonderful thing and, believe it or not, almost unique to the Judeo-Christian faith because only God knows what is to come and He has revealed it to us.

Amen