

Amazing Easter Prophecies

There are two special fantasies of almost every childhood. The first is to be invisible. The second is to see the future. What if we could see and hear everyone else but no one else could see and hear us? What if we knew the future before it happened—everything from next week's news to how and when we are going to die?

The truth is that these fantasies are not going to happen. That's probably a good thing. We are not going to be invisible and we cannot hide. And while we may think it would be good to see the future and know what to expect, that could be the most dangerous and destructive information we could ever have.

But then comes Jesus. Did you know that Jesus used to be invisible? Forever in the past he was the invisible Son of God until he was conceived and born in Israel at Christmas. He then took on a body and became visible for the rest of eternity. And as God he can and does see and know the future before it happens.

The events leading up to Easter did not come as a surprise. Jesus knew what was coming ahead of time. He not only knew what to expect but it was all according to the divine plan. I Peter 1:20 explains, "*(Jesus) was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.*"

What God has planned and known from forever ago first starts appearing in the Old Testament as hints of what is to come. One thousand years before Jesus was born one of his ancestors wrote words that Jesus would speak during his crucifixion. The ancestor was Israel's King David who authored the song that we call Psalm 22. It was riddled with previews of Jesus' death by crucifixion. Listen to some of the lines:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
Oh my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent.*

*I'm poured out like water;
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;*

*you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.*

It reads like an eyewitness account of Jesus' crucifixion. But, did David really picture in advance the dreadful death of his future descendant? Probably not. He was more likely to have been describing some scene of his own time and experience. However, God was using David's writing to hint at what was to come—even down to the details of what Jesus said and what was done to him. ("*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" and, "*... a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.*")

Five hundred years later another hint of what was to come came from the pen of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. He spoke God's truth to the nation of Israel at an especially difficult time in their history. Their glory days were gone. The great kings of Israel were all dead.

Conquerors had come from distant lands, had trampled them down, destroyed their cities, desecrated their temple and carried them off into captivity. It seemed unlikely that they would ever again have political independence and their own king in the nation of Israel. But Zechariah said they would. He predicted the day when another Jewish King would lead a processional into the capital city of Jerusalem.

He wrote in Zechariah 9:9, "*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*"

Actually, donkeys were more highly regarded in those days. Powerful and important people often rode them. If a king came into a city riding on a horse it was a symbol of pride and war. If a king came riding into a city on a donkey it was a symbol of humility and peace. For half of a millennium these words were memorized and quoted by Jews in Israel and elsewhere. They yearned, hoped, waited and expected their future king—their Messiah—to symbolically enter Jerusalem in this way.

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Palm Sunday marks the anniversary of the day these dreams came true. Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey! The crowds were thrilled. They took off their coats to carpet the way. They waved palm branches to celebrate the occasion. Jesus knew exactly what it meant. The people knew exactly what it meant. The itinerant preacher from Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah. He was the new King of the Jews.

There are many more hints of the Easter events tucked in the cracks and crevices of the Old Testament. But in Isaiah 52 and 53 there is also a very graphic description of what would happen during Holy Week. You see, for the most part, the Hebrew people were expecting a Messiah who would be tough and triumphant. These people had suffered generation after generation for centuries at the hands of foreign armies and governments. Their cities were destroyed, their temple desecrated, their families were enslaved and their suffering was truly great. Their hope was for a Messiah who would lead them in victory over their enemies—someone who would finally get even, bring justice and make everything good again.

The words of the great prophet Isaiah were written around 700 B.C. and they absolutely did not fit the Jewish expectations. Instead of a triumphant conqueror they portrayed the Messiah as a Suffering Servant. It was a hard picture to accept. Yet, that is exactly what God intended. Unknown to those ancient Jews, God planned for the Messiah to come twice—the first time in suffering and humility; the second time in conquest and triumph.

The words Isaiah wrote predicted what Jesus would be like and what he would suffer. Jesus was never known for his good looks. It was his character and message that drew crowds. Jesus went through the suffering of crucifixion that distorted his appearance until he may have looked something less than human. And it was all described seven centuries before it actually happened in Isaiah 52:13-53:11:

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to

him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

To Christians these are amazing prophecies fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. But to skeptics they may be just ancient writings that Jesus and his followers seized upon for their own purposes to make it seem to fulfill prophecy and add credibility to their cause. So, maybe we need more. Maybe we need the actual definite predictions of Jesus.

Jesus actually became increasingly specific in predicting his own death and resurrection. He gave places

and numbers and verifiable details. Perhaps you could argue that they, too, could be manipulated. You could say you are going to do something and then do it and you are a prophet whose predictions come true. Maybe that would work for a prediction to go to the dentist next Wednesday, but hardly can that be said about telling when and how you are going to die and come back to life again. But that's what Jesus said. In Mathew 16:21 we are told:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Jesus' predictions seemed absolutely absurd to his most loyal friends and followers. They just could not accept what he said. Peter directly told Jesus he was wrong in Matthew 16:22: "Peter took (Jesus) aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'"

But Jesus was not wrong. What he said would happen did happen. The records of the fulfillment of all the prophecies are many. The eyewitnesses were in the hundreds and hundreds, and some of them were themselves skeptics. We read the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction in Matthew 27:27-66 and 28:1-7:

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head.

They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they

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placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others", they said, "but he cannot save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."

Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection

they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"

Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

As evening approached, there came a rich

man from Aramathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir", they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again'. So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

"Take a guard", Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and they made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

God's plan from before the creation of the world happened! The prophecies were true. The predictions happened. Jesus died on the cross just as he said he would. And he did it for us. Jesus loved us and died for us so that we could believe in him and accept him and trust him and have our sins forgiven and gain eternal life.

Have you accepted what Jesus did for you? That's important because each of us must believe and accept to get the benefits Jesus died to give us. The Bible is very

clear that whoever believes in Jesus as Savior and commits to him as Leader will have their sins forgiven forever, will receive immediate eternal life from God and will be guaranteed a place in heaven.

Before you were born God loved you enough to send his Son for you. God wants you. I invite you to say yes to God.

What matters most is personal faith. But it is also important to tell God that you believe. Here is what I propose. Tell God right now that you accept Jesus. If you have done this before you can reaffirm your faith. If you are in doubt, now is a good time to make sure. If you have never committed your life to God, this is the right time for the first time.

What I will do is prompt you in a prayer of faith. You can use the words I suggest or pick your own. It is the heart's belief more than the exact words that are most important to God. But say something like this:

God, I acknowledge that I am a sinner who needs a Savior. I want to tell you today that I believe in Jesus. I believe he died on the cross for me. I believe he rose again from the dead as he said he would. I accept him as my Savior and I pledge my allegiance to follow Jesus as my Leader for the rest of my life.

Father, you have heard the prayers of faith. You have looked into our hearts and seen the sincerity of our faith and trust. You have done what you promised. Thank you for making Jesus our Savior from sin and the Leader of our lives. Bless everyone who believes in Jesus today. In Jesus' name, amen.

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