

Preparing the Way of the Lord

12/04/2022

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I don't know how many of you are interested in the FIFA World Cup. The World Cup is a quadrennial competition where national teams from all over the world gather and contest the world cup. And it is currently being held in Qatar. The group matches were played until yesterday, and they entered the knockout tournament yesterday. The United States also made it to the round-of-16 stage. However, yesterday, the US lost to the Netherlands and failed to advance to the next round. Still, many experts say they have already achieved their goal, as the USA team is building a young-player team and aiming for greater achievements in the future.

Soccer or "Football" is known as the most popular sport worldwide. Many people prepare in various ways while waiting for the biggest soccer festival, the World Cup. Usually, the World Cup is held around June after the leagues of major countries have finished, but as the current World Cup kicks off in November to avoid the hot Qatar summer, all soccer leagues in each country are having a break. Managers and players of each national team have tried to match all conditions and tactics to the best for the games of the World Cup. Fans from all over the world also make plans long in advance to watch World Cup matches. In particular, I heard that many Argentine fans saved up for four years right after the last World Cup to watch the play of the living legend player Messi, who is playing his final World Cup before his retirement. They hope and firmly believe that, this time, Messi will be a World Cup winner for Argentina. Messi scored a goal in the knockout match yesterday and contributed significantly to his team winning and advancing to the round of 8.

Perhaps some of you have noticed that Messi's name is an abbreviated form of Messiah. Just as Argentines waited for Messi to play, some people eagerly awaited the appearance of Messiah. For almost 500 years after the Jews returned from captivity in Babylon, Israel was under the influence of several empires from the Middle East or Europe. After the end of the Persian Empire's rule and the Hellenic Empire's conquer, the Maccabees, a family of Jewish priests, freed Judea from foreign rule and ruled the nation independently for about 70 years. But the Roman Empire invaded, and again, it became a colony of the empire. So, devout Jews eagerly hoped that the promised Messiah would come soon and restore Israel.

When a nation's president visits a place, many people, including the bodyguards, prepare for it attentively. Then, we might expect that the scale and quality of the preparation for the coming of Messiah, the Son of God, the King of kings, must be more magnificent than ever and should be done by numerous people. However, when Jesus came to the world, his coming was unrevealed. Most Jews did not even know that Jesus had come. The Bible says John the Baptist is the one who prepared the path for Jesus, and his cry was the only preparation for the way of the Lord.

Matthew 3:1 and 3 reads, "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea ... This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.' " " The Israelites were a people who heard the word of God through the prophets. However, after the prophet Malachi, they did not get the prophecy from God. The time difference between Malachi and Matthew, that is, between the end of the Old Testament and the birth of Jesus, was about 400 years. During this time, God did not speak to them through a prophet. That is why this period is also called 'the dark period' or 'the silent period.' There was a man who appeared after 400 years of silence, and his name was John. We call him John the Baptist to differentiate him from John, the disciple of Jesus because he baptized people and Jesus.

Matthew 3:3 is a quotation from Isaiah 40:3. As the coming of the Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament, the one who prepared for the coming of the Lord was already prepared in God's plan. Isaiah declares, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" And he adds more specific ways to prepare for the way. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." In other words, God sent the one who would make the path of the Messiah straight and level.

We can realize the importance of a straightforward way when we take a crooked way. Nepal is famous for its mountains and has a vast mountainous area. Its capital, Kathmandu, is also located at 4600 feet above sea level. So, it's hard to go fast on the road from Kathmandu to other parts of the country, even though it is paved and called a highway. How long does it usually take to get to a place 60 miles away in the United States? If there is no traffic, we can reach there in about an hour. However, it takes over

three and a half hours without traffic to get from Kathmandu to the orphanage 60 miles away that my former mission team serves. Since there is only one lane each in and out, accidents or landslides quickly create massive traffic. In addition, accidents often occur when drivers fall off the road while driving while drowsy. It is never easy to go along such a winding road.

How did John the Baptist prepare the way for the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ? What did he do to make the bend and the bumpy roads of this world straight and level? Matthew testifies that John the Baptist cried out like this. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Repentance means radically changing the direction of our lives. Pondering the biblical meaning of repentance, it is not simply to regret or feel sorry about the past. Repentance requires us to turn over dramatically from our evil deeds to God’s goodness. The voice that God sent to prepare the way of the Lord calls people to leave the old way and walk in the light, the new way toward God.

If the Messiah was the political ruler expected of pious Jews, those preparing his way would probably have raised funds to aid him in his political activities, mobilized supporters in advance, or gathered generals and strategists to fight in future wars. However, Divine salvation through the Messiah had a thoroughly different goal from what secular people hoped for. Jesus Christ came to the world to resolve the problem of evil and overcome the wages of sin, death, and his incarnation was to give us new life. Thus, those who prepare the way of Christ must first repent their sins and proclaim to this world that God’s judgment and ultimate restoration are near. So, we must be the ones who can guide the people of the world toward the righteous way of the Lord so that they can leave the evil path and turn to the good path of God. That is what John the Baptist, the voice preparing the way for the Lord, did.

Now, John the Baptist rebukes the Pharisees and Sadducees with harsh words. He’s not saying they don’t deserve to be saved. John the Baptist emphasizes that they cannot be saved by baptism without a genuine change of heart, that is, repentance. “Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance” (v. 8). In other words, any qualification or position that we believe we obtained by our own deeds cannot guarantee our salvation. Rather, God’s salvation will change our hearts and help us grow in the fruits of repentance.

It can be applied equally to us today. If we say we believe in Jesus but hate others and turn away from those in need, even when we see their difficulties, it can mean we still stay on the evil path. We must not carelessly condemn others as we regard ourselves as the chosen ones. The prophet in the wilderness proclaims, “God is able from these stones to raise children to Abraham.” It means that our salvation depends only on God. God’s great salvation goes beyond our thoughts and judgment. It is only our Lord who will distinguish between wheat and granary. He is our savior but will come again among the earth as our judge.

On Friday morning, my wife and I watched the last group stage match of the Korean team. Juyoun doesn’t usually like to watch a sports game, but the only one event that makes her watch a soccer game is the World Cup. Only 5 minutes into the game, the Portuguese team scored a point. We were very disappointed. The Portuguese team has great players and one of the possible candidates for the World Cup winner. According to a site, the estimated expectation for the Korean team’s victory was only 9% possible before the game. And it became even lower. The Korean team equalized in the 27th minute, but they needed one more goal to advance to the next round. However, as the game neared its end, they failed to score a goal. The Korean players looked exhausted. Even though they did not have a great result, many people were satisfied with the performances of the Korean team in the group stage matches. I also thought they were very well prepared this time. So even if they failed to advance to the next round, I would praise them. In fact, I was already expecting negative results. However, just minutes before the end, Korea dramatically scored another goal. And in the end, they won the match and succeeded in going to the next round. My wife and I enjoyed the delight of the victory.

Just for the World Cup, people prepare so much. People are so happy and excited just with the World Cup match’s victory. However, the joy and beauty the Lord’s new creation in Isaiah 11 will allow us cannot be compared with anything in this world. Look at the peaceful vision of the reign of God. And for this, we must repent. We must first set ourselves free from selfishness, conceit, greed, lust, and indifference. And we must cry out over the sins and evils of this world. We must pray for all the weak in this world and lead them to God’s ultimate recovery. That is why God calls us to prepare the way of the Lord. God is with us and gives us strength for this holy task. Many people probably say the world’s power is stronger, and it will win the game. Remember, however, our team has the Greatest Of All Time (G.O.A.T) player who won over everything on the cross. The moment to enjoy the delight of final victory with Jesus Christ will be given to us soon.