

We Wish You a Merry Rescue

The Advent of Christ and the Rescue of Sinners (Part 2)

Introduction

The Text

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" ²⁹ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26–38)

Christmas in Light of Creation and Covenant

A. Last week I argued that Christmas can only be properly understood in light of creation. Now let me refine this a bit more here this morning. It is my understanding that Christmas, if it is to be properly understood, must be seen not only in light of creation, but in light of covenant.

1. When God created man, He entered into covenant with him. This covenant with Adam will set the contours for the whole story of redemption that follows. It's as if God, in the first pages of Genesis, is digging out the channel within which the rest of redemptive history will flow.
 - a. Last week we noted that in light of creation, that Christmas is rescue. In light of covenant, we see more clearly just why we need to be rescued, how we need to be rescued, who can actually rescue us, and what we are being rescued from/for.
 - i. As J.I. Packer writes: "The gospel of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame" (as quoted in Rhodes, p. 17).

The Covenants and Our Text

- A. Amazingly, packed within our text, I believe, are allusions to all the major covenants of the OT. These covenants are united fundamentally and unfold historically through the pages of the OT until reaching their climactic fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
 - 1. We shall trace these covenants, with their unfolding unity, towards their fulfillment in Christ. I will make the connections to our text in Luke as we go, but it will be a bit backwards for us. Instead of starting from the text and moving back to the roots in the OT, I will begin with the roots and follow them forward to our text in the NT.

(1) The Covenants With Man (Christ as Human)

What Is a Covenant?

- A. Before we can proceed, we must ask: What is a covenant? One author puts it simplest I think: “A covenant [biblically speaking] is an agreement between God and human beings, where God promises blessings if the conditions are kept and threatens curses if the conditions are broken” (Rhodes, p. 18).
 - 1. I would add 3 additional qualifiers to this that will serve us as we move on to analyze each of the OT covenants one by one:
 - a. The biblical covenants are: (1) Initiated by God’s grace; (2) integrated with man’s work; and, ultimately (3) Incomplete until Christ’s advent!

The Covenant of Works

- A. Let’s begin with the covenant made in the garden.
 - 1. This first covenant made with Adam, while related to the many covenants that follow, stands separate from them. For, while it could be said that God still initiates such a covenant by grace (in that He didn’t have to move close to His creatures and enter into relationship with them), this covenant is at bottom, what theologians have termed a covenant of works.
 - a. Adam is not called to faith in God’s work in, through, and for him, but to be obedient in his own strength. Here we see what man himself is made of.
 - b. The conditions are set before Him: “Enjoy the fruit of every tree except for that one.” And Adam is free to choose: obedience to the covenant with the blessing of eternal life (held out in promissory form by the fruit of the tree of life); or disobedience with the curse of death hanging as a threat (“In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” [Gen 2:17b]).
 - c. But he partners with Satan against His Creator—we call it: the fall. The creation is cursed and its bond with the Creator is fractured. The Covenant

of Works with Adam failed, not on God's side, but on man's. It didn't end in righteousness, glory, and life but sin, shame, and death.

d. And this sets the covenantal contours for all that follows.

- B. We live now in the wreckage of Adam's covenant failure. We live in a fallen world. Everyone knows it. We've got problems. And we're always trying to locate the source of our problems are we not? And where we locate the source of our problems will determine where we go looking for possible solutions.
1. You might locate your big problem in your relationships. If you don't have a significant other, you start looking desperately. You even start to consider the nice guy who smiled at you from work, even though he's not a believer. If you do have one, you consider a messy breakup or divorce, because this other person is not fixing you.
 2. You might locate the big problem in guns. If we just take access to guns away it will stop all the bloodshed. You can sympathize with the goal, but this isn't going to work. People will just find another way of killing each other—blades, or stones, or my hands around your neck. We've been doing for years, since Adam really: *"What have you done [Cain]? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground"* (Gen 4:10).
 3. But wherever we're tempted to locate the problem, the true location is much deeper and higher than we often care to admit.
 - a. Deeper: meaning it's not out there with this or that person or circumstance, but in here, in the chambers of my own heart.
 - b. Higher: meaning it's not ultimately with the creation but with the Creator.
 - c. In other words: I have a heart problem with God!

The Covenant of Grace

(1) The Promised Seed

- A. It is into this fallen and fractured context, that God speaks grace. Before cursing Adam and Eve He gives a promise, pointing us to the real solution to the real problem: an offspring will come to the woman Who will put things right (Gen 3:15). He's the One who will do a deep dive into the human heart and work redemption there.
1. Though we deserve the curse of immediate and eternal death, God refuses to do so. He's always restraining the full blow of the covenant curses because He's determined to bring us back into the covenant blessings: eternal life!
- B. This promise is dropped like a seed into the barren soil of this fallen world. And the rest of Bible is written to record how this seed first sprouts and unfolds towards its full flower in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- C. And now we start to tread onto the verses of our text in Luke. For in Luke we have the announcement of Gabriel that this long-anticipated offspring of the woman is here! “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son...” (v. 31a).

(2) The Noahic Covenant

- A. Returning to the OT, the promise of a redeemer-offspring starts to take on covenantal form. We trace its unfolding from Adam through Seth to Noah.
1. And you remember men’s hearts are so toxic at this point that God’s ready to blot everything out...“But Noah found favor [grace] in the eyes of the Lord.” (Gen 6:5–8). God’s not giving up on the world.
 2. He establishes the beginnings of His covenant with Noah in ch. 6: “Make an ark and I will save you.” God initiates by grace, integrates Noah’s work, but clearly the redemption is incomplete. For the world after the flood is no better than the world before: “The intention of man’s heart [even Noah’s] is [still] evil from his youth” (8:21b).
 - a. But we’ve advanced, one step closer to the promised offspring.
- B. This scene with Noah is most likely being alluded to in our text in Luke when Gabriel comforts Mary: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor [grace] with God” (v. 30). It’s the NT equivalent of the OT phrase that first occurs with Noah.
1. The grace that preserved the world from judgment in Noah’s day, now finds its fullest expression in Mary’s. The ark by which we will be carried through the fierce waters of God’s wrath against man’s sin and come out into a new world...is being built!
 - a. Peter would later say that baptism into Christ corresponds with Noah and his family getting into that ark (1 Pet 3:20b-21).

(3) The Abrahamic Covenant

- A. Returning to the OT, the promised offspring is traced from Noah through Shem to Abraham.
1. In the midst of the paganism and darkness, God approaches a childless Abraham and establishes a covenant: “I will give you an offspring, make of you a great nation, give you a land, bless you and all nations through you, and ‘I will be [your] God’ (Gen 17:8).”
 2. This covenant is initiated by God’s grace but is then integrated with man’s work: “I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him” (18:19).

3. We watch Abraham wrestle with faith and integrity throughout his life. And even when the promised child, Isaac, came, it becomes clear he's just a shadow of the true promised offspring to come. For even Abraham himself would die a sojourner in the land of promise with just 1 legitimate son from his marriage with Sarah. The work is still incomplete.
 - a. But we've advanced one step closer to the promised offspring!
- B. We're connected forward to our text in Luke in v. 37 where the redemptive activity of God with Mary and Elizabeth is grounded in a citation of [Gen 18:14](#)—"For nothing will be impossible with God." That's taken directly from the Abrahamic narrative where God is defending before Sarah his ability to bring a child to the barren and old couple.
 1. The greater Isaac is here! Here is the One who will truly mediate God's presence and blessing to all the nations!

(4) The Mosaic Covenant

- A. Returning to the OT, we come to the Covenant God makes with Moses.
 1. The Mosaic Covenant is not contrary to the promise made to Adam and Eve or the covenant made with Abraham, but a further unfolding of them.
 - a. The law of Moses, we're told by Paul, "was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made..." ([Gal 3:19a](#)). It was intended to be "our guardian until Christ came" ([3:24](#)).
 - b. In fact, God is moved to enter into covenant with Moses and Israel, when "[He] heard their groaning [in Egypt], and...remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" ([Ex 2:24](#)).
 2. He initiates the covenant by grace, and integrates with it the condition of man's work: "⁴You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself [grace].⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples..." ([Ex 19:4-5](#)).
 3. But again, things would be incomplete until the advent of Christ. Again, man would be insufficient on his side. The failure of man to uphold the terms of this covenant is foreshadowed for us in the death of the very one after whom it is named: Moses. For Moses dies outside the land of promise he worked his whole life to get into. He never even makes it in!
 - a. God is teaching us something here about our utter inability to uphold the law and our desperate need for the promised offspring!

- B. Now, the Mosaic Covenant seems to make an intriguing appearance in our text in Luke. For Gabriel gives the name of this child to Mary: “You shall call His name Jesus” (v. 31b)—in the Hebrew: Yeshua, or Joshua.
1. When Moses died outside of the land, who was it that took his place and led the people in? Joshua. Here in our text, is the greater Joshua, who will lead God’s people into the promised land of His presence!

(5) The Davidic Covenant

- A. Returning for the last time to the OT, we trace the promised offspring now from Abraham as it narrows in on David.
1. Here we reach the height of Israel’s story. It is David that seems set to bring fulfillment to the Abrahamic hope. For he leads Israel into full acquisition of the promised land, gives them rest from their enemies, and sits down on the throne in Jerusalem.
 - a. And God initiates a covenant with him by grace: “^{12b} ...I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.¹⁴ I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam 7:12b–14).
 2. But He integrates into this covenant the condition of man’s work: “If your sons keep my covenant and my testimonies that I shall teach them, their sons also forever shall sit on your throne” (Psa 132:12).
 3. That’s a big “if.” And it proves to be the downfall of the Davidic monarchy and the kingdom of Israel. The sins of David and Solomon and the kings that follow in line, leave the throne vacant and the land evacuated.
 - a. They’re thinking it’s over. The Psalmist in Psa 89 is reflecting on all this when he writes: “³⁸ But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed [David].³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust” (vv. 38–39).’
- B. With these words echoing in our minds, the words spoken back in Luke by Gabriel of this coming Christ ought to seem all the more pronounced to us: “³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (vv. 32–33).
1. The vacant throne will again be occupied. The evacuated house will again be filled. Forever! Here is the David’s greater Son, even David’s Lord (Luk 20:40-44). Here is the King of the covenant!

(2) The Conception of God (Christ as Divine)

Incomplete But Advancing?

- A. At every point along the way, man has not kept His side of the covenant, and yet the promise and covenant move forward, incomplete but advancing. How?! If my works are a condition for the continuation and fulfillment of these covenants, how are they allowed to advance? How could He overlook our failure for so many years?!
1. Answer: From [Gen 3:15](#) onward, He was looking forward to the fullness of time when God the Son would descend into humanity and keep covenant on man's behalf!
 - a. Gabriel, speaking to Mary, says: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God"* ([Luk 1:35](#)).
 - i. Incomplete until Christ's advent. Incomplete until Christmas—when God Himself would come down, not only to initiate a covenant with us by His grace, but also to fulfill the conditions of man's work.
- B. There are 2 sides to this. He would have to both suffer the covenant curses that we rightly deserve for our sin, and secure the covenant blessings by fulfilling for us all righteousness.
1. He will bruise the head of the serpent, but the serpent will wound Him in the process.
 2. He will bring us back into the garden paradise of God's presence and grant us access to the tree of life ([Rev 22:2](#)), but to get us there the flaming sword of the cherubim that stood guard outside Eden would have to fall upon Him.
 3. He would bring us safely through the flood of God's wrath and into a new world, but He could only do this if He gave His body over to the waves in our place.
 4. He would mediate the blessing of God that was promised to Abraham, but He could only do it if the knife that was called off of Isaac fell on Him.
 5. He would be the new Joshua, leading God's people into the holy land of His presence, but He could only be Joshua if he first took on the curse signified in Moses. He would have to die outside the land, cursed, forsaken, not for His own sin but for mine!
 6. He will sit on the throne of David forever, the Prince of Peace over me, but He would only get to the throne by way of the cross. We now sing that song: *"Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne..."* But we sang a different song on Calvary's hill. O we crowned him alright. We pressed into His temples a crown of thorns!

- C. This, my friends, is the meaning of Christmas! When we could not find our way back up to God, God comes down for us! And He gives Himself away!
1. I don't care what the origin of gift-giving at Christmas is (pagan roots, the Magi, St. Nicholas). This is what I'm telling my girls: We give gifts to one another on Christmas because we are celebrating the day God gave to the world the greatest gift of all time: Himself!

“⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 Joh 4:9–11).

Closing Observations

(1) Christmas Means God Thinks I'm Valuable

- A. Do you believe that? In reformed circles we talk a lot about God's sovereignty and man's total depravity and we can think we're nothing before Him. I must say that, in one sense, this is true: “He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Psa 103:14); “All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment” (Isa 64:6).
1. It's true. We are nothing before Him and can add nothing to Him. And yet, we are precious in His sight. Some of you really need to hear this. You think humility is self-hate. And it's not. Godly sorrow never leaves you flogging yourself. It traffics towards the one who was flogged in your place. It moves you towards the amazing fact that God, in spite of all your weakness and sinfulness, cherishes you beyond words.
- B. That's what Christmas means! The rescue communicates the value.
1. On a boat expedition, as we were coming in, I leaned over the rails and lost my sunglasses. I'm not diving in. If that was my daughter? I'm going head first. I'll die if I have to. Which is exactly what He did.

(2) Christmas Means God Is Not Afraid of My Mess

- A. Christmas means God comes into the chaos. He's not afraid to get His hands dirty with us. We are messy people. This heart, it's a mess! But He's not turned off by it, He's coming in!
1. We do opposite in flesh. Run from mess and messy people. We roll our eyes when we see their name in our caller ID again. So needy. So messy. If we do enter another person's mess, often it's got all these limitations on it. We'll go down to the food bank and serve a turkey on Thanksgiving to the homeless, but get to know them, let them spend a night in my house? Yuck!

- B. But Jesus doesn't merely give a few handouts from heaven, He comes down and makes His home here on earth, in a fallen world, in skin and bones. He lives here. He dies here. The cross is a bloody mess. And when He rises, He's still got the marks of my mess on Him, the nail prints, the scars. He's not afraid of your mess. Give it to Him!

(3) Christmas Means God is Not Bored with the Mundane

- A. I read in Oswald Chambers a one-liner on this point: "Beware of posing as a profound person; God became a Baby" (My Utmost, Nov 22).
 - 1. There is nothing beneath or too mundane for God. The incarnation means: "I want to get into every little part of your life, of the human experience, and redeem it, make it heavenly."
 - a. I don't care where you are: in your car, in your cubicle, up at 2AM with one of your kids, no matter how ordinary or mundane it feels heaven wants to be there!

(4) Christmas Means God Is the Only True Christian

- A. That is meaning of the covenantal history we surveyed. We can't do it, so God rolls up His sleeves, comes down into humanity and does it for us as a man, and now He's doing it again in and through us by His Spirit. The only reason this Christian life thing is working for me is because Christ is living it in and through me!

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).
- B. The movement is from Bethlehem through Calvary to Pentecost, where He comes to be born in me. And He takes this sinner by the hand and starts me on the path to glory. What am I doing there in the new heavens and new earth, plucking fruit from the tree of life?
 - 1. That's the meaning of Christmas. I wish you a merry rescue!