

New Covenant Christmas



Gary Wilkerson December 9, 2013

Isaiah was speaking of Jesus when he prophesied these words: “Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages” (*Isaiah 49:8, emphasis mine*).

As the church of Jesus Christ, we celebrate Isaiah’s prophetic announcement every Christmas. The prophet declares that God is about to send his Son as the answer to every cry and prayer. Yet there is more embedded in this verse than we usually associate with the story of the baby in a manger. We’re told that Jesus was being sent in human form to unveil God’s *covenant with man*: “I will...give you as a covenant to the people” (49:8).

When God gave us his New Covenant, he didn’t set up a new system with a new set of rules. Instead, he sent us a person. In short, *Jesus* is the covenant that God sent.

The Old Covenant was very definitely a set of rules based on conditions. It stated, “If you do this or that, then God will give you life. But if you don’t, you’ll miss God’s blessing.” Of course, the people constantly fell short of God’s standard. They were unable to keep his law, which was holy and pure. As a result, their lives were dogged by guilt, shame and despair.

Today, we’ve somehow gotten it in our minds that God’s Old Covenant needed to be tweaked. But Jesus didn’t come to tweak a covenant; he came as the covenant. He didn’t come to show us the blessings of grace; he is the blessing of grace.

Another false image we’ve developed is that Christ came as an appeaser between us and an angry Father. We see Jesus as someone who’s always apologizing for an aging parent: “You’ll have to overlook his gruffness. He’s become kind of cranky in his later years. If you really got to know him you’d see how loving he is.”

Both of these are misconceptions. And both assume that Jesus came to make the law easier on us. The truth is Jesus actually made it harder. He said in one of his first sermons, “You’ve heard it said, ‘Don’t commit adultery.’ But I say, ‘Don’t even look at someone lustfully, or you’ve already committed adultery.’ You’ve heard it said, ‘Don’t commit murder.’ But I say, ‘Don’t even be angry with your brother. If you do, you’ve already committed murder.’”

This was Jesus’ first act of ministry on earth: to make God’s law more difficult for us. It was an act of incredible mercy. As the embodiment of the New Covenant, he was showing us the impossibility of our ability to keep God’s law. He increases the requirements of the law to show us how we could never do it without his grace and power.

Throughout church history, men like Luther, Calvin and Wesley have emphasized how important it is for God’s people to understand the New Covenant. They saw it as a matter of rightly dividing God’s Word — to grasp what is law and what is grace. If we fail to comprehend this one matter, they said, we’re doomed to a lifetime of despair. Luther and Wesley knew this to be true because they experienced that despair for themselves.

Here is the difference: Under the New Covenant, God’s law was no longer an external standard to strive for. Instead, his law would be written on our hearts, through the Holy Spirit: “God’s love has been poured into our

hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (*Romans 5:5*). We are filled with the Holy Spirit — the very life of God himself — to help us obey his holy Word. Christ loved us and gave himself for us that we might have this newness of life.

There are three accusing voices that seek to rob us of that life.

The first accuser appeared in the Garden of Eden: “The accuser of our brethren...who accuses them before our God day and night” (*Revelation 12:10*). Satan’s accusations are one thing Jesus came to deal with as our living, breathing covenant. In Isaiah 49, God didn’t send a theology to crush satanic lies — he sent Jesus. The earliest prophecy in Genesis stated that Satan would bruise the Messiah’s heel but that Jesus would crush the devil’s head. Two thousand years ago at Christmas, Jesus brought that reality into our lives.

I sometimes have an experience that I think others may have. Occasionally I wake up in the middle of the night with a free-floating anxiety. It’s as if I’ve done something wrong but I don’t know what. This anxiety was a lot more pronounced a decade or so ago. Whenever the phone rang in our house, it would startle me. My first thought was, “Who’s calling to tell me I’ve messed up? What did I do wrong?”

That’s the accuser. He whispers, “You’re no good, worthless, a burden to others. Look at your history, how many times you’ve messed up. You’ll never change.” Our relationship with that voice began in the Garden. But when Jesus came he declared, “That ends right now.” He adds an amazing reassurance: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father” (*John 5:45*).

This brings up the second voice who accuses us: “There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope” (*John 5:45*). What did Jesus mean by this? Moses represents the Old Covenant law, received from God on Mt. Sinai. If we set our hope on accomplishing God’s law, it is Moses’ voice that accuses us when we fail. You may think, “Why would anyone ever put their hope in the Old Covenant law?” Christians do it all the time. It happens when we say, “God has given me a command and I can do it. I can maintain his holy standard.”

That’s how we “set our hope on Moses.” That’s also the moment our hearts begin to grow sick: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (*Proverbs 13:12*). We have no real hope when we set our sights on accomplishing Moses’ law — because we don’t possess the ability to do it.

Under these terms, we may try to worship Jesus, but it feels earthbound. Something in our hearts doesn’t feel right. We sense something is missing — and it is: the grace of God that comes to us in Christ, the living covenant. When Moses’ voice accuses, “You’re not holy,” we keep trying. But the result continues to be the same — and we end up in despair.

This brings up the third accusing voice: our own. As God’s people, we sometimes don’t “rightly discern ourselves.” Paul says, “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (*Romans 2:15*). Who is Paul talking about here, this person who still has the law written on his heart? It is the Christian with one foot on Mt. Sinai and the other on Mt. Zion. He is still trying to live out vestiges of the Old Covenant. He tells himself, “I’ve done well in the Lord all week. There’s no reason I can’t put together another week like this one.”

Such thoughts “excuse” him, according to Paul. In other words, he is no longer dependent on God as he strives to fulfill the law. But when failure comes, the same voice that “excused” him now accuses him: “Yes, you’ve been keeping the law, but now you’ve broken it. What kind of Christian are you? A hypocrite or just a loser who can never please God?”

The Pharisees tried to keep up a “righteous performance” through legalism. Everything they did was based on duty and obligation, with no joy. As they failed, they kept adjusting the law, adding loopholes. Over time, keeping the law was no longer about loving God but about maintaining a lifeless, impersonal code. It produced a cold, joyless group of leaders who continually covered their tracks while judging others. It also produced a broken, despairing congregation of people who could never measure up to the laws laid on them.

Jesus addressed every accusing voice in his Sermon on the Mount.

When Christ delivered the beatitudes, it was to a fractured, hopeless body of believers. He told them, “Blessed are you who are broken, who mourn, who are poor in spirit. You are blessed right now, not because you’ve done

anything to earn it. You're blessed because I am with you."

What a revelation. We are blessed simply because Jesus is with us. The Christmas blessing of Emmanuel — "God with us" — takes on a whole new meaning in light of Isaiah's prophecy:

"I will...*give you as a covenant to the people...*to apportion the desolate heritages" (Isaiah 49:8). The blessing of Christ's presence was going to silence all of our accusing voices.

This silencing happened literally in the story of the woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders brought her to Jesus and demanded that he accuse her, too. But secretly they had another reason for bringing her before him: They wanted to accuse Jesus.

Have you ever heard Christians accuse God of something? I hear it from people all the time in my pastoral counseling: "God isn't working in my life. I pray to him faithfully, but he doesn't answer. I've done everything I can, but he still hasn't set me free." This is exactly what Satan wants us to do: accuse God in our hearts. It creates a never-ending cycle of bondage.

Look at how Jesus answered the adulterous woman's — and his own — accusers: "He stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her'" (*John 8:7*). God was no longer the one being accused. Jesus had turned the spotlight where it belonged: on their own sin. Their response was, "They went away one by one" (8:9).

Note what Jesus said to the woman then: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (8:10). The King James Version translates this verse, "Where are those thine accusers?" This is exactly what Jesus says to us today: "Where are your accusers? Where are the voices of Satan, Moses and your own heart, which say, 'You're sinful, hopeless, a failure'? They're all gone. I am your righteousness now. And I have silenced them all."

Those voices may still scream and shout in our ears. But when they do, we'll hear another voice above them all: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (10:27). Christ's voice will speak to us, "I have silenced your accusers." His truth cuts through all clamor and din with his peace, which passes all understanding.

What Jesus said to the woman next is the most profound truth of all.

"Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more'" (*John 8:11*).

It is absolutely essential for us to build on this firm foundation: God does not accuse us! It is a foundation based not on law or accusations or despair, but on the glorious, gracious action of God himself. When he hears an accusation against us, he tells Jesus, "Crush it." In that moment, we will hear the voice of the Holy Spirit saying, "Do not listen to that lie. It has been destroyed on the cross. Neither does God accuse you. His Son has set you free."

We are going to sin — the Bible makes that much clear. But when we do, the voice we hear will be the Holy Spirit's. He brings conviction for our transgressions — yet it is a hopeful conviction, one that leads to joyful repentance and not to despair. "I will...*give you as a covenant to the people...*to apportion the desolate heritages" (*Isaiah 49:8*).

We have been given Jesus. And in our time of discouragement, we will hear his voice above all others: "Neither do I condemn you." May God supply you with his grace to build on that foundation — and rejoice in your New Covenant Christmas!

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