

# The Gospel of Christmas in the Old Testament

## Three Advent Sermon Studies

By John C. Jeske, Armin J. Panning, and Richard D. Balge

### I. The Gospel Adam and Eve Heard

#### Genesis 3:15

By John C. Jeske

In order to celebrate Christmas properly one must review some important facts of history. People differ in their opinions of the value of history. Someone has suggested that the most accurate chart of the meaning of history is the set of tracks made across a piece of white paper by a drunken fly whose feet were wet with ink. Winston Churchill, on the other hand, felt quite differently about the value of history. He said: “The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.” This series of three sermon studies has been designed to help Advent worshipers appreciate the Gospel of Christmas. Each of the three Advent sermons looks back into Bible history, to see how God prepared his people for the amazing Gift he had in store for them in Bethlehem. The third sermon of the series emphasizes *the Gospel as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed it* seven centuries before Christ was born. The second sermon reviews and restates *the Gospel Abraham believed*. The sermon which leads off the series goes back to the very beginning of history to hear *the Gospel as our first parents heard it*.

It seems strange to hear that the Gospel which Adam and Eve heard was not spoken directly to them but to Satan, the sworn enemy of God and man. Picture the scene in the Garden of Eden when these words were first spoken. Adam and Eve stood before God with the blush of the first sin still upon their cheeks. Like stubborn children they had run away from their Father’s home, imagining they could be happier and more complete human beings living on their own. They had looked upon Satan as their friend, as someone who had their best interests at heart. Now God had some shattering news for Satan.

“Satan, there has been friendship between you and the woman. You spoke to her, and she listened. You suggested I was holding out on her, and she believed you. You urged her to turn her back on me, and she obeyed. And unless I intervene, she and the whole human race with her will forever live with you. And so, Satan, I’m going to change that. I’m going to put enmity (that vocable has the position of emphasis in the Hebrew sentence) between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. I’m going to rip that disguise off your face and show people who you really are—their worst enemy, just as you are the sworn enemy of God.”

The enmity that God announced would extend over three levels. There would, first of all, be enmity “between you and the woman,” between Satan and Eve. There would also be enmity between “your offspring,” (Satan’s followers, unbelievers) “and hers.” (Eve’s descendants are believers). Aren’t you glad of that? Because of that we can recognize Satan as our enemy. But the most shattering news God gave Satan was that the enmity would come to a climax in one particular descendant of Eve. “He will crush your head.” Not only would God rip off Satan’s mask and expose him for what he is, God would one day send a Champion who would crush the serpent’s head, destroy the power of Satan.

Luther points out that with these words God mocked Satan. Since God didn’t identify the particular descendant of Eve, Satan had to fear every time a baby was born, never knowing: “Is this the one who is going to destroy me?”

The Gospel Adam and Eve heard had ominous news, however, not only for Satan. The second person of the Holy Trinity, God from all eternity, heard a sobering message in those words originally addressed to Satan. He was going to have to battle mankind’s worst enemy. The closing words, “...you will strike his heel,” make it quite clear that this battle was going to be a grim and bloody business. If you’re hiking in rattlesnake country you try to avoid being bitten. But Christ knew he couldn’t avoid it, nor would he have wanted to. As our

Champion set out to crush the serpent's head the serpent struck his heel and Christ died the most wretched death imaginable—rejected by his own countrymen, deserted by his friends and forsaken by his own Father.

The Gospel Adam and Eve heard is quite different from the slush and sentiment many associate with Christmas; it announced an awesomely difficult and a frightfully painful assignment for the Son of God. God never treats evil as something which can be removed easily with the wave of a magic wand or with some celestial abracadabra. Defeating the prince of hell and rescuing a world of sinners is a miracle far greater than, say, the miracle of creation. Creating the world cost God only a demonstration of his power. Rescuing the world from Satan's power cost him his Son.

It has been said, "Nobody wins a war." Anybody who watched the TV spectacular "The Day After" would probably agree. But the Gospel Adam and Eve heard announces a very clear-cut victory. And this is good news, indeed, for the sinner.

The sin of our first parents does not seem terribly serious at first glance. Taking a piece of fruit they shouldn't have seems to be no more than an act of disobedience—something not normally considered a capital crime. A closer look at their action, however, shows that more than disobedience was involved. With their action Adam and Eve had told God: "We can't trust you. You're holding out on us. You don't really love us. Instead of finding our happiness living under you, from now on we'd prefer to find happiness on our own." Satan had managed to break up God's family and to bring the human race under his control.

How satisfying it must therefore have been for Adam and Eve to hear God tell Satan: "The promised Descendant of the woman is going to crush your head." A snake with his head crushed has lost its power to hurt us. How satisfying for us to know that Satan's power over us has been broken. When he talks to us as though he owns us, we need to remember that he's the father of lies. Christ's perfect life and his innocent death have once and for all smashed Satan's power and freed us from his control.

There is another piece of satisfying news here. When Satan succeeded in convincing Adam and Eve to look upon themselves as their own bosses and to look upon God as an unwelcome intruder in their lives, he planted his evil nature in God's children. You and I still have that evil nature; we brought it with us into the world and we'll carry it with us until we leave. But the Gospel Adam and Eve heard assures us that this evil nature is not our true nature. St. Paul has assured us: "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creature." (2 Co 5:17). Because Christ has broken Satan's power in us, we are free to live for God now, until we live at his side forever.

Does the Gospel Adam and Eve heard seem pretty obscure, if not downright difficult to understand? There are some expositors who feel that all we have here is a reference to the enmity between snakes and people: snakes kill people, and people have a deep hatred for snakes. Satan surely did not find the passage all that hard to understand. When he learned that the Savior was to come from Abraham's descendants he concentrated his efforts to make trouble for the Jewish nation. When he learned the Savior was to come from the royal line of David, he managed to overthrow that line, which at Christ's time resembled the rotting stump of a fallen tree. And from the moment the choirs of heaven announced that the Child of Mary is the promised Savior Satan unleashed his unrelenting enmity—by means of Herod's sword at the beginning of Christ's life, through the 40-day temptations in the desert at the outset of Christ's public ministry, and in the horrors of Gethsemane and Calvary at the close of his ministry. Although the precious truths of this first promise were spoken in a form which partly veiled the full measure of truth, challenging the early believers to ponder the word, this passage furnished light for the early believers. It furnishes light for us, too. And it gives us good reason for singing our hymns of praise to the Savior in this holy season, until we can sing them in his presence.

The following outline summarizes these truths.

### ***The Gospel Adam And Eve Heard***

#### ***I. Shattering news for Satan***

- A. God will rip off his mask, expose him for what he is: mankind's worst enemy.
- B. God's chosen one will crush him.

#### ***II. Sobering news for the Savior***

- A. Awesome assignment: defeat the "prince of this world" (Jn 12:31).

B. Grim and bloody business: terrible price Christ would pay in Gethsemane.

*III. Satisfying news for the sinner*

A. Satan's grip on us is broken.

B. We are free to live the life to which God has called us. (Our sinful nature is not our true nature).

**II. The Gospel Abraham Believed**

**Genesis 15:1–6**

*By Armin J. Panning*

One occasionally hears the expression, “Nothing is sure in this world except death and taxes.” There can be little doubt about the continuing presence of death and taxes, but these are not the *only* certainties.

In a sin-filled world we can be absolutely sure of yet another certainty, and that is fear. Recall fallen Adam's attempt to account for his hiding from God with the words, “I heard you in the garden, and *I was afraid*.” As the first in this series of advent texts has pointed out, the antidote to sin-induced fear is the Christmas gospel, the promise of a Savior as that was first given in Genesis 3:15.

The Christmas gospel has always served to allay fear. Note the “Do not be afraid” spoken to Mary (Lk 1:30), to Joseph (Mt 1:20), and to the shepherds (Lk 2:10). Every prediction of the promised Savior was essentially a “Christmas gospel.” We have such a prediction also in Genesis 15:1–6, and again, it is spoken to someone who is very much afraid. We are informed of that immediately when Moses tells us, “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram.’”

*Verse 1: “After this”*

Chapter 14 indicates what the antecedent of “this” is. In many ways these were very good days for Abram. He had been successful in battle (14:1–17); he had been blessed by Melchizedek (18–20); he was rich and prosperous (21–23).

But even “after this” all was not well with the patriarch. Abram was afraid. Note that our text gives no indication of Abram's seeking out God; God came to him and said, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield (Protector against harm and evil), your very great reward (Provider of good—yes, himself the ultimate Good).”

*Verses 2 & 3: “I remain childless”*

God's gentle encouragement draws from Abram the reason for his fear: no son; no heir; no chance for fulfillment of the glorious promises given him at his call (Gen 12:1f.). Hence Abram's plaintive question, “O Lord, what can you give me?”

*Verse 4: “a son...from your own body”*

The problems were real. God doesn't minimize them or put Abram down for not being able to resolve them. Rather he himself brings the remedy. God's answer is a promise—actually the repetition of a promise given earlier. The servant Eliezer will not inherit and take over Abram's house. Abram himself will bear a son!

*Verse 5: “Count the stars...so shall your offspring be.”*

God's promise goes far beyond foretelling merely Isaac's birth. Not just one son but many descendants will come from Abram's line. The promises of land and family will be abundantly fulfilled.

But that isn't all—or even the main part of it. This is the Christmas gospel, for God is here speaking of *the Seed* in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Note the Apostle Paul's inspired evaluation: “The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Ga 3:16). Confer also Ga 3:19 with its statement: “the Seed to whom the promise referred.”

Abram understood God's promises. He knew them to be speaking of Christ. Jesus testifies: “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; *he saw it* and was glad” (Jo 8:56).

But Christ's day was still 2,000 years off in the future. How then did Abram "see" it? The answer, of course, is: by faith. And to that also Moses testifies in our text.

*Verse 6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."*

There was nothing Abram could do, or that he needed to do. God promised; Abram took him at his word, and God credited it to him as righteousness (declared him just/forensic righteousness). Hence the Christmas gospel of the promised Seed serves as the unassailable basis for God's encouragement, "Do not be afraid." That thought can lend itself to useful advent preparation under a treatment somewhat as follows:

It was a dreadful picture which was recorded for us in last week's text as it spoke of man's fall into sin and the resultant fear and estrangement from God—a situation remedied only by the "Christmas gospel" of the Seed of the woman.

The Seed of the woman is very much in evidence also in our present text where God uses that same Christmas gospel in coming to the patriarch Abram with the encouraging words:

### ***Do Not Be Afraid***

#### *I. I am your shield*

- A. It is a common experience that just when all seems to be going well, trials and tribulations follow. Cf. Abram's case.
  1. military success/Melchizedek's blessing/wealth (Gen. 14)
  2. "after this" (15:1) came fear and apprehension on Abram's part because of his childlessness (2,3)
    - a. problems were real (age/barrenness, etc.)
    - b. apparent conflict with the promises which Abram had received
    - c. valid causes for fear
- B. God's intervention (4)
  1. no initiative on Abram's part; God takes hold!
  2. God promises to be a "shield" (Protector)
    - a. protection vs. threat of Eliezer's taking over
    - b. protection vs. threat of childlessness and unfulfilled promises

Also in our life, the problems and difficulties are real. Often they admit of no human solution, but God says, I am your shield. I will protect you. Nothing bad will happen to you.

Transition: God's promises, however, are not merely negative, i.e., the assurance that nothing bad will happen. They are also gloriously positive. Hence he says, DO NOT BE AFRAID, for

#### *II. I am your very great reward*

- A. Assurance to Abram from the starry host (5)
- B. This is Immanuel (God-with-us) speaking and promising
  1. multitude of stars implies abundant blessing (family/land)
  2. Abram's seed, however, is to be a blessing to *all* the families of the earth (12:3)
  3. God is promising a Savior (Christmas gospel)
    - a. promise centers on the Seed, not seeds (cp Ga 3:16)
    - b. Abram realized and understood the promise as referring to Christ (cp Jo 8:56)
- C. Abram accepted the promise and received its blessings by faith (6)

Abram was justified by faith in Christ. That's fine for him, but what about us? The same plan of salvation still applies. "The words, 'it was credited to him' were written not for him (Abram) alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Ro 4:24).

The Christ child looks so meek and lowly lying in the manger, but he is the one who lived the perfect life for us, who died in our place and who was raised again to assure us that our sins are

forgiven, that everything which causes us fear can be dismissed, that an eternity of bliss in heaven awaits us. Hence, proper advent preparation always remains: hear and heed the words of the Christmas gospel in which a gracious Savior invites us, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

### III. The Gospel Which Isaiah Preached

#### Isaiah 9:6,7

By Richard D. Balge

The verses under consideration are numbered 5 and 6 in the Hebrew text. The portion begins with the particle כִּי which appears for the third time in three verses. With the first occurrence (v. 3, Hebrew) the prophet adduces the reason for the people’s rejoicing, which is that the Lord has delivered them from the oppressor. With the second כִּי Isaiah explains that deliverance has occurred because the Lord has destroyed the foe. Then follows the first word of the pericope, explaining how these things have come to pass.

To say “have come to pass” is to remind ourselves that Isaiah is speaking of future events as accomplished facts. יָלַד and נָתַן are prophetic perfects, denoting that what God promises through his spokesman is as good as done, cf. v. 7c (English).

Believing Jews of the first century regarded the child to be born, the son to be given, as the Messiah. The Talmudists and later Jewish commentators preferred to identify him as Hezekiah, and this view has been endorsed by many modern scholars. Some of Hezekiah’s contemporaries *may* have understood the passage as a reference to him and his reign, but events proved them mistaken. The prophecy stood nevertheless and was regarded as Messianic.

The מְשֻׁרָה which will be on the shoulders of this child probably refers to a symbol of authority rather than to the burdens of office. Robe, clasp and scepter have been suggested. The point is simply that the promised son will have the authority to rule.

The names by which the child will be called state what he is and what he does, not what his parents will name him on the day of circumcision.

The versions vary in the translation of פֶּלֶא יוֹעֵץ. פֶּלֶא is really substantive, “a wonderful one,” or “a wonder.” It is possible to regard the participle יוֹעֵץ as a construct and render the phrase “a wonder of a counselor.” Thus, “Wonderful Counselor” (NIV) is as legitimate as “Wonderful, Counselor” (KJV). It is no more necessary to separate the two words than to separate the two which follow: אֵל גְּבוּר. Luther did separate the latter two, rendering אֵל as *Kraft* and גְּבוּר as *Held*, although in another reference he joined the terms.

The LXX translated פֶּלֶא יוֹעֵץ as Μεγάλης βουλήs ἄγγελος. This suggests that they emphasized the extraordinary quality of the counsel more than the extraordinary nature of the One who gives it. For whatever reason, the other appellations are omitted in LXX. These matters need not be rehearsed in a sermon. They ought, however, to be reflected on by the sermonizer and they may affect his practical treatment of the text.

The Promised One will be the ultimate fulfillment of the Lord’s promise to David, 2 Sm 7:12ff. No other descendant of David ever accomplished what this one will achieve.

The means by which he establishes and upholds his kingdom are especially important. He will do this בְּמִשְׁפָּט וּבְצִדְקָה. In the broad context of Scripture it is possible to understand “justice and righteousness” as Law and Gospel. The LXX rendered it ἐν δικαιοσύνη και ἐν κρίματι.

It is Luther who points out that a truly eternal kingdom requires that the Ruler’s subjects be raised from the dead if he is to rule over them eternally.

“Zeal” is קִנְיָה, literally “glowing fire.” “(It) contends for the object of its love against everything that touches either the object or the love itself” (Keil-Delitzsch). Luther calls it “love mixed with hatred, or angry love, or the anger of love. Therefore, while God loves us, he is angry with our enemies, sin, death, Satan, so that he can more abundantly practice His love toward us.”

Other matters of interpretation will be reflected in the outline which follows.

## Outline

### *Introduction*

The Scriptures bear witness to Christ. No single Old Testament author had more to say, with greater detail and clarity, than did Isaiah. Cf. 7:14, 42:1–9; 53; 61. Here, 700 years before the event, he preaches the Christmas Gospel: UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN.

#### *1. He Is Born To Rule (v 6a)*

He would come to govern a people who did not want to be ruled by the Law any longer, cf. 1:2b,3; 2:6,8; 5:7b. The Law could not change or improve them and most of their kings only contributed to their apostasy and immorality. Isaiah prophesied that this rebellion would bring God’s judgment on them: humiliation, oppression, war, captivity.

But now the promise (9:1–5) of honor, light, joy, deliverance, peace. Why? How? “For unto us...” The sign that He has the authority and responsibility to rule and to establish a peaceful reign is there for all to see: “The government will be on his shoulders.”

Not only in Israel and in Judah, but everywhere in God’s good world there are rebels. All of us were born enemies of God and at war with each other.

This Boy was born to remedy that. It did not look as though government were on his shoulders: scourge marks, crossbeam, my sins. He goes to die.

But just in his death he destroys the archrebel. Cf. descent into hell, resurrection, also Mt 28:16. He rules over all Eve’s children, a blessing for all nations, ruling in grace.

#### *2. He Is Equipped To Rule (v. 6b)*

His names tell how and why he can rule. Oriental peoples may have given their kings names like these, but that didn’t make it so. He is called these things because they are so.

He is a Wonder of a Counselor. He has a marvelous plan to rescue the race. No one else could have devised such a plan or carried it out. He is wonderful in doing what he came to do: save sinners.

He is called the Mighty God, not as an honorary title, but because he is. Redemption is divine work, impossible for a mere human being to carry out. He did it, demonstrating throughout his ministry and especially by his victory over death that he is the Mighty God.

He is called the Everlasting Father. That does not mean he is the Triune God or the First Person of the Trinity. It does mean that he is our loving, benevolent Guardian, acting as a Father to us, Psalm 103:13. He is everlasting: never gets tired, never grows old, never stops doing what he was born to do. He 13:8.

He is the Prince of Peace. Every year at this time we are reminded that the world’s kind of peace has not yet arrived. But we also hear and believe that God has declared peace, Lk 2:13; that Christ is our Peace, Is. 53:5; that by faith in Him we have peace with God, Ro. 5:1. With God’s peace in our hearts we live at peace with one another and share his peace with others. We recognize him as the Ruler of our lives and act accordingly. We know that even our daily struggles, Christian warfare, are a sign of his peace. If we belonged to the devil there would be no tension between what we are as God’s children and what we do because we have not yet arrived in heaven.

#### *3. He Will Be Successful In His Rule (v 7)*

His realm keeps on increasing as he reaches out beyond Israel, beyond his own time, to us and to others through us. His reign is stable (cf. “peace”) because he is always in charge, always acting in the interest of his own.

He established his reign with justice and righteousness. He satisfied God’s justice in his life and by his death. He fulfilled all righteousness for us and his righteousness is credited to us just as our sins were charged to him.

His rule is eternal, not like that of David and his successors, not like the kingdoms of this world. The King of kings reigns forever and his rule culminates in raising us from the dead to eternal life.

The prophet saw all this as an accomplished fact because “the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.” He will not give up what is his, forfeit what he has paid for, abdicate his rule.

This is the Christmas Gospel which Isaiah preached. God has given us what we really need: himself and his salvation. It is a gift outright, which will never wear out.