Jesus Christ: The Sum and Substance of Biblical Prophecy

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Christians believe that God is an infinite spiritual being who remains unknown unless he chooses to reveal himself. Thankfully, he does so in nature and in the Scriptures. But it is the mode and manner of God's revelation of himself in the Scriptures which brings us to Jesus Christ, the sum and substance of biblical prophecy.

In contrast to general revelation of God, the Scriptures are the self-revelation of God in human history unfolding through a series of historical events, in which God speaks and acts to redeem sinful men and women.[1] The ramifications of this conception of redemptive history are profound. For one thing, this means that Christianity is in its very essence thoroughly eschatological and necessarily linked to that series of historical events in which God has done what is necessary for his people to be delivered from the guilt and power of sin. For another, the drama of redemption is a panoramic vision extending from the creation of the world in the opening chapters of Genesis, to our final redemption as depicted in Revelation 22. The redemptive-historical horizon includes the past, the present and the future.

This means that the entire Bible is thoroughly eschatological in its outlook, especially throughout the Old Testament which anticipates the coming of Christ, the redeemer of Israel and the mediator of God's covenant. The prophets are continually looking ahead to the "day of the Lord." The coming of this redeemer and his promise to return yet a second time, guarantees that even though the New Testament is grounded in the fulfillment of these Old Testament promises, all is not yet accomplished. There is a final chapter in the story, a chapter yet to played out in the theater of redemption.

Many Christians are under the mistaken impression that only limited sections of the Scriptures contain any reference to "future things." This outlook, in effect, limits eschatology to those issues

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[1] Geerhardus Vos, Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 5-8.

relating to the timing of the rapture, to speculation about political events in the Middle East and Israel, as well as to the debate about the nature of Christ's millennial reign upon the earth after his return. This produces the ironic situation in which those who speak about eschatology the most actually have the least to say. By limiting eschatology and Bible prophecy to the rapture and the millennium, and by tying Old Testament prophecies to literal future fulfillments, the proper place of Christ's role in biblical prophecy is eclipsed.

It is important to step back from the details of Bible prophecy and look carefully at the big picture. We must gaze upon the entire panorama of redemption from a distance. The story begins with creation. Next, we consider the fall of the human race into sin as the backdrop for redemptive history. Redemptive history is exactly what its name implies–the biblical account of God delivering his people from the guilt and power of sin resulting from the fall. Then, we look ahead to see the final goal. But the end is not merely paradise regained. The final goal is paradise glorified! As William Dumbrell reminds us, "in very broad terms the biblical sweep is from creation to the new creation by way of redemption, which is, in effect, the renewing of creation."[2] This sweeping vision is set out in the opening chapters of God's self-revelation. Genesis 1 and 2 speak of creation and paradise, while Genesis 3 speaks of the fall into sin and paradise lost. From the moment paradise is lost and the curse is pronounced upon the race, God is already promising final redemption (Genesis 3:15). We need not wait until the end of the story to learn that God's mercy and justice will triumph over human sin and its consequences for God's people. Even before the specific details in the drama of redemptive history begin to unfold, the outcome is certain. God has decreed that he will redeem his people from their sin and that one day he will renew his creation. When all is said and done, there will remain no hint or trace of the stain of sin. No longer will there be any curse.

In order to understand Christ's role in biblical prophecy, we must understand something about

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[2] William J. Dumbrell, The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), p. 9.

the various covenants which are found throughout both testaments. Covenants between kings (suzerains) and their vassals (servants) formed the basis of much of daily life in the ancient near-eastern world, especially in matters legal and financial. This was certainly true for ancient Israel. From a biblical perspective, covenants take on even greater importance, since Israel's king (suzerain) is the great king, and the nation is his chosen vassal because of his sovereign will.

When considered in the context of the Old Testament, a covenant may be defined as "a relationship under sanctions."[3] In each of the Old Testament covenants there are two parties involved, God and his people, or their divinely chosen representative such as Abraham or Moses. In these covenantal relationships, the two parties relate to each other in terms of blessing and curse, the outcome depending upon faithfulness to the terms set forth by the covenants. Like a contract of sorts, when terms of the covenant are fulfilled, the servant receives the blessing promised by the great king. But should the obligations of the covenant not be met, the covenant curse, in the form of previously agreed upon sanctions between God and his people, is imposed.

The major covenants in the Old Testament take two basic forms, covenants of promise and covenants of law. In covenants of promise and blessing, God himself swears the covenant oath to fulfill all the terms and conditions of the covenant. In covenants of works or law, the people of God swear the oath of ratification.[4]

The most prominent case of the former–a covenant of promise–is God's covenant with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15. It is God who sovereignly approaches Abram and swears on oath to him–"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." As Abram falls into a deep sleep, he is given a vision of a smoking firepot passing through butchered halves of various animals, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. The implication of the vision is clear to someone like Abraham steeped in ancient

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[3] Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), p. 16.

[4] Kline, By Oath Consigned, p. 16.

covenants and rituals of ratification. If YHWH fails to be Abram's great reward and shield, the covenant curse, which is graphically pictured by the severed animals, is to fall upon YHWH himself, the one who swears the oath and initiates the covenant rituals.

When the dream ends, we are told, "on that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram" (v. 18). Notice that in this particular covenant which God makes with Abram, it is God who swears the oath of ratification, making this covenant a covenant of promise. As is typical in such ancient covenants, the LORD also defines the geographic boundaries within which the terms of the covenant apply. This explains why the account of the ratification of this covenant in Genesis 15 includes the list of peoples who reside between the two great rivers, the Nile and the Euphrates. This promise of a land was gloriously fulfilled when Joshua led the people of God back into Canaan (Joshua 1:2-9). As Joshua puts it: "So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there" (Joshua 21:43; cf. also 1 Kings 4:20-21).

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the latter type of covenant–a covenant of law–is found in Exodus 24, in which the people of God, not YHWH, swear the covenant oath of ratification. According to the amazing account we find in Exodus 24, YHWH called Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, along with seventy elders, up to Mount Sinai where the group was to worship him at a distance. But Moses–the covenant mediator anticipating the true covenant mediator, Jesus Christ–was to approach God alone. "When Moses went and told the people all of the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice. `Everything the LORD has said, we will do.' Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said (v. 7)." Unlike the covenant of promise that God made with Abram, in covenants of works/law, such as the covenant ratified at Sinai, God does not swear the oath of ratification. Rather, it is the people who do so. The covenant God made with Israel is ratified by his people, who by swearing their obedience on oath, will receive the promised blessings of the Mosaic covenant if they obey, or the covenant curses if they disobey. The particular blessings and curses associated with this covenant are spelled out in

Deuteronomy 27-30.[5]

With the distinction between these two kinds of covenants–promise and law–in mind, we can now turn to the two overarching covenants–the covenant of works/creation and the covenant of grace/redemption–under which these individual covenants of law and promise are to be subsumed. This, too, is a very important point to keep in mind, because the covenant of works and the covenant of grace progressively unfold throughout the Old Testament. The way in which they do says a great deal about how we are to understand the eschatology of the Bible and why we must keep Christ at the center.

These two over-arching covenants enable us to see the continuity which exists between the individual covenants we find throughout the Old Testament. The covenant God makes with Abraham, and then subsequently with his descendants Isaac and Jacob, and then with Israel, are not isolated covenants with no organic connection with what goes before or after. Rather, the particular covenants which God makes with his people are individual and repeated ratifications of the one covenant of grace, which is first promised in Eden, and then later ratified with Abraham, the father of all those who believe.

Seeing the essential continuity between these covenants is important at a number of levels. This prevents us from mistakenly seeing the Old Testament as essentially law and the New Testament as essentially gospel. Rather, there is law and gospel in both testaments. This covenantal structure also enables us to safeguard the clear teaching of the New Testament, that there is but one gospel (Galatians 3:8), one plan of salvation (Ephesians 1:4-6), one covenant mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) and one common faith (Ephesians 4:4-6). This also enables us to understand how the individual covenants in the Old Testament are often framed in terms of promise, while in the New, they are framed in terms of fulfillment. The individual covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, as part of a larger covenantal structure, foreshadow that New Covenant ratified by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:11-18). The redemptive events found throughout the Old Testament are unintelligible apart from this covenantal

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[5] Kline, By Oath Consigned, pp. 14-22.

structure and emphasis upon God's promise of a coming redeemer, who is also the covenant mediator.[6]

Therefore, as redemptive history begins to unfold, it is the first Adam–the biological and federal representative of all humanity–who fails to do as God has commanded under the terms of the covenant of works. It was the LORD God who said to Adam, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). This covenant of works–or as some Reformed writers speak of it, the "covenant of creation"–lies at the very heart of redemptive history.[7] Under the terms of this covenant, God demands perfect obedience of Adam, who will either obey the terms of the covenant and receive God's blessing, eternal life in a glorified Eden, or else fail to keep the covenant and bring the covenant sanction down upon himself, and all those whom he represents, namely, all of humanity. Adam's act of rebellion brings the curse of death upon the entire human race. This covenant of works is never subsequently abrogated in the Scriptures, a point empirically verified whenever death strikes. This covenant also undergirds the teaching of Scripture, which states that for any of Adam's fallen children to be saved, someone must fulfill all the terms of the covenant of works without so much as a single infraction, in thought, in word, or in deed (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:16).

Although some argue that there is no such covenant between God and Adam because the phrase "covenant of works" or "covenant of creation" does not explicitly appear in the biblical text, not only are all the elements of a covenant present in God's dealings with Adam, but the later biblical writers refer back to the account of Eden in precisely these terms. The prophet Hosea tells us that Israel will come under God's judgement, because "like Adam, they have broken my covenant."[8] In Romans 5:18-21, the

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[6] For classic statements of the Reformed conception of the covenants, see: Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, trans., George Musgrave Giger, ed., James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), II.169-269; Herman Witsius, The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man, reprint ed., (Escondido, CA: den Dulk Foundation, 1990); and Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

[7] Meredith G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2001), pp. 10-14.

[8] B. B. Warfield, "Hosea VI.7: Adam or Man?" in Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 1, ed., John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 116-129.

perfect obedience required by this covenant is spelled out, in part, when Paul writes that sinners are declared righteous on the condition of Christ's obedience on their behalf. Here, the critical question is simply this: "Obedient to what?" Paul's answer is that Jesus Christ is perfectly obedient to that same covenant which the first Adam disobeyed. The resurrection is proof that Christ fulfilled the terms of this covenant, because after laying down his life for our sins, God raised him up, Lord of life (Romans 4:25).

Since Adam is the federal head of all those countless men and women who will spring from his loins, once he disobeys the covenant of works, he plunges the entire human race into the guilt and consequences of sin. Although the curse subjects all of humanity, as well as all of creation, to the bondage of the guilt and power of sin, God has decreed to redeem both his people and his world. From the very outset, then, the unfolding drama of redemption will be one in which God seeks to rescue men and women from the guilt of Adam's sin, as well as undo the consequences of Adam's act of rebellion upon all of creation.

The very fact that God demands perfect obedience from his creatures, even from the beginning of the drama of redemption, necessitates the coming of a second Adam who will be obedient unto death (Philippians 2:8), and who will become "sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Fall necessitates the coming of a redeemer, a redeemer who must fulfill the terms of the original covenant of works which Adam had failed to keep. In addition, the redeemer himself must establish a covenant of grace in which God will deliver Adam's fallen children. Yet he must do so without sacrificing his justice to manifest his love for lost and fallen sinners. This is why the promised redeemer will die upon a cross, something beyond the realm of imagination for an Old Testament believer looking for a deliverer to come. This becomes all the more remarkable when we consider that when Jesus Christ dies upon the cross, he bears in his own body those very same covenant curses, which God showed Abram in Genesis 15 (Galatians 3:13).

When God placed Adam under the covenant of works, Adam failed to obey. Adam and his

family were cast from Eden and never allowed to return. This recurring theme of God making a covenant, the subsequent disobedience of his people, the consequences of the covenant curse resulting his people being cast from the land of promise, resurfaces throughout in the drama of redemption. At Mount Sinai, God placed Israel under the law, epitomized by the Ten Commandments, in which were codified all of the requirements of the covenant of works. The commandments were written upon heart by virtue of the fact that all of Adam's children bear God's divine image. But Israel, too, failed to keep God's commandments, which brought curse upon the people in the form of the curse sanction of being removed from the land.

In his forbearance, God sent his prophets to call his disobedient people to repentance. But Israel repeatedly showed contempt for God by increasing her sins and killing God's messengers. Like Adam, the nation came under God's covenant judgement and was cast from the land. This time, God's people were not cast from Eden. They were cast from Canaan, that very land which God had promised to Abraham. Adam had failed. Now Israel had failed. A redeemer was still needed, who would fulfill the covenant of works. "For what the law was powerless to do . . . God did by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful man" (Romans 8:3).

All of this is important to keep in mind because it means that the history of redemption is the progressive unfolding of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace throughout the whole of Scripture. These two covenants–the essence of what is known as covenant theology–will continue to resurface throughout the eschatology of both testaments. It is in the progressive development of these two covenants that the person of Jesus Christ–the only mediator between God and man and that redeemer promised throughout the whole Old Testament–is revealed.

This explains why the coming redeemer is revealed as a second Adam. He is not only the covenant mediator, but the one who as the new representative of God's people is also Lord over all creation. It is the second Adam who ushers in a new creation when he rises again from the dead that first

Easter morning. Therefore, it is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, that the seemingly diverse themes of covenant and new creation, join perfectly together. When the second Adam justifies the many through his own perfect obedience, he does so in terms of the New and better covenant, a covenant in which God will declare sinners as righteous because of the merits of Jesus Christ and in which God fulfills all of the promises that he made to Abraham. As the Apostle Paul puts it in his second letter to the Corinthians, to participate in Christ's reconciling work is likewise to participate in the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). This new creation–which is nothing less than a paradise glorified–is also that New Jerusalem, which John depicts as follows: "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and the lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face" (Revelation 22:3-4). Once again, God and humanity will dwell together just as they did in Eden, only this time "for ever and ever."

The connection between the new creation and the covenant of grace is important to keep in mind. The one who makes all things new, Jesus Christ, is also the mediator of the covenant of grace. Therefore, new creation and the covenant of grace are forever joined together in the person and work of Jesus Christ who has died for our sins and was raised for our justification. This reminds us that the basic panorama of redemptive history is creation, fall, and recreation. And creation, fall and redemption, play themselves out in redemptive history in terms of God's dealing with his creatures in terms of the covenants of both testament. This means that Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of all biblical prophecy.