

The Christmas Connection: God's Covenant with David

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Knowing and loving the story

1. Humans love stories, especially thrilling stories. This God-given love for stories is something we discover early on in our childhood. Stories engage our mind, move our emotions, and capture our heart. Whether fiction or non-fiction, stories teach us lessons and help us make sense of the world.
2. Our God has chosen to reveal Himself through a story. He could have merely given us a list of His attributes, accolades, character traits, and qualifications for His role as God and called us to believe and trust Him on that alone, but He didn't. Instead, He told us about His dealings with weak men like Abraham and Moses and King David. He told us about Egypt, the Exodus, and a nation called Israel. He told us about their prophets and poets and singers and songwriters. And then He told us about Jesus of Nazareth, whose personal story is, in many ways, common to every man - yet it is also so utterly unique because of His identity.

The Israelocentric nature of our faith

1. In our modern Western Christian context, we often forget the fact that Jesus and the apostles were *Jewish*, and their faith and hope was firmly rooted in and oriented around the Law and the Prophets. This dramatically affects our view of who Jesus is, why He came, and what He will do when He returns.
2. God made *covenants* with the ancestors and nation of Israel, declaring His intent to reconcile sinful humanity to Himself and to restore what was lost in Eden's garden through the fall. These covenants are the "backbone" of redemptive history and provide "anchor points" along the storyline of the Scriptures.
3. Contrary to popular assumption, the word "gospel" (or "good news" / "glad tidings") was not invented by Jesus, the apostles, or the angel that appeared to the shepherds when Jesus was born. It is found often in the Old Testament and referred to the good news brought to Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem regarding the promises and hope God gave them through the covenants (Isaiah 40:1-31; Isaiah 52:1-10; Isaiah 60; Isaiah 61:1-22; Nahum 1:5; 1 Chronicles 16:23-36; Psalm 96:2).
4. Israel, as God's "firstborn" nation (Exodus 4:22), would inherit a very specific plot of land in the Middle East (Genesis 15:18-20) and become a "holy nation" of priests (Exodus 19:6) to God. Through this, all of the other nations would be "blessed" (Genesis 12:3) as the knowledge of God went forth from Zion (Isaiah 2:2-3) and Israel's king ruled over the earth from Jerusalem.

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5. The Law and the Prophets declare that these promises would not come to pass until Israel passed through a time of severe testing, chastisement, and “trouble” in the latter days (Deuteronomy 4:30-31; Deuteronomy 31:29; Jeremiah 30:7). God would deliver them from the wicked hand of the nations and dwell in their midst forevermore.
6. Thus the *gospel* is “first” (Romans 1:16; 2:9-10) a message to Israel and Jerusalem as a “comfort” (Isaiah 40:1) in their last days trouble. The comforting message is that God would indeed be faithful to His covenantal promises, just as He had always been faithful used the word “gospel” and connected it to Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection, they were explicitly declaring an *Israelocentric* message and hope.

**"And now I [Paul the apostle] stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"
(Acts 26:6–8 ESV)**

The Covenants and the Christmas Story

1. Because of time, distance, and cultural ignorance, we 21st century Westerners have a tendency to approach the Christmas story as something just a little more than a fairy tale. Yet the birth of “the seed” (Genesis 3:15) has been humanity’s ever-burning flame of hope for thousands of years. Our vague knowledge of the story of the Old Testament is what keeps us from deep wonder and awe that filled Mary, the shepherds, and the angels we hear about at Christmas every year.
2. In order to better understand and be awed by the birth of Jesus, we must return to the Old Testament. Though the birth of Jesus finds its foundational significance in Genesis 3:15, we will “zoom in” to examine God’s promise to David concerning the future of Israel, David himself, and David’s house (family).

**“And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring (seed) after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.”
(2 Samuel 7:9–14 ESV)**

3. Each phrase in this promise to David is laden with meaning.
 - a. *Verse 9*: For God to “make for [David] a great name” implies continuity with the Abrahamic covenant and God’s promise to make Abraham’s name great (Genesis 12:2).
 - b. *Verse 10-11*: God reiterates the promise given to Abraham of the everlasting possession of the land in Canaan (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18). This is critical because it reveals that from God’s perspective, that dimension of the Abrahamic covenant remained unfulfilled. Israel did not yet have permanent, perpetual possession of the land.
 - c. *Verse 12*: Like others before him, the promise is made to David’s *seed*, linguistically and conceptually linking this covenant with the progressive unfolding of Genesis 3:15 and the hope of a descendant that would crush the head of the serpent and restore what was lost because of man’s sin.
 - d. The concept of a *monarchy* had been revealed to Abraham. The *tribe* was revealed through Judah, and now the *line of kings* was being revealed through David.
 - e. *Verse 13*: The promise of the *seed* is linked to the building of God’s house, or *dwelling place*.
 - f. *Verse 14*: This Davidic king inherits the role of Adam and Israel as “the son of God”. In order to “image” God to the nations, he must walk in the prescription for the king given by Moses in Deuteronomy 17:16-20 – to walk as a servant-king and embody God’s law in all that he says and does.
 - g. *Verse 16*: Though David’s immediate descendants would wander from God and be disciplined, God promised to place David’s righteous seed on the throne *forever*.
4. The moral failure of Solomon and the eventual collapse of the Davidic dynasty through the Babylonian Exile painfully revealed the now obvious fact that none of those who had been Israel’s king (called “*messiah*”) up until that point were the one spoken of by Nathan the prophet. None of their thrones had been established, and none of their houses remained. Similar to what occurred with the promises in the Abrahamic covenant regarding the land, many years would pass with the throne vacant in Jerusalem, even after Israel’s return from exile.
5. Fast forward now to 6BC when the Roman Empire was the dominating power in the region. Herod, a half-Jew and Rome’s puppet king, was on the throne in Jerusalem. The Temple had been significantly adorned and built up by Herod, but every Jew knew that there was something dramatically wrong with the beautiful Temple: *God was not dwelling in the Holy of Holies*. Though they had returned and rebuilt hundreds of years ago, the people knew that their *exile* was not yet over.

6. On an ordinary day in history, the angel Gabriel appeared to an aged priest named Zechariah as he ministered in the Holy Place in the Temple. Just a short time later, he again appeared to a seemingly ordinary Jewish teenager in a despised town in the Middle East. As the wealthy and learned scrutinized the Law and jockeyed for power in Jerusalem, Gabriel was standing in a little house announcing the beginning of another epoch in redemptive history.

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 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, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

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.”

(Luke 1:26–35 ESV)

7. The language of Gabriel’s announcement to Mary is not random and must be seen in context to the story the scriptures have been telling thus far. From the very beginning of the story of the life of Mary’s son Jesus, He was foretold as the *son of God*, the *coming King* who would sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem, and the one whose *kingdom would never end*. Mary and any Jew would have recognized Gabriel’s words from the *Davidic Covenant* in 2 Samuel 7.
- a. “*you shall call his name Jesus*” – *Jesus* in Hebrew is *Yeshua* and simply means “the LORD saves”. It is synonymous with the Old Testament’s *Yeshua*. The two Joshuas in the Old Testament give insight into the identity, calling, and purpose of “Joshua of Nazareth” (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 32:12; Deuteronomy 31:23; Zechariah 6:12-13)
 - b. “*He will be great*” – emphasizing *royalty* like the Abrahamic promise (“I will make your name great” – Genesis 12:2) and the Davidic promise (“I will make for you a great name” - 2 Samuel 7:9)
 - c. “*He will be called the son of the Most High*” – this was promised to David’s son in 2 Samuel 7:14: “I will be to him a *father*, and he shall be to me a *son*”, which connected David’s son to the lineage of the *seed* from Genesis 3:15. This also suggests strong connections with Psalm 2, where a unique *son* would be given dominion over the whole earth by the LORD.

- d. *“the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David”* – a direct connection to the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-13). Gabriel says that Jesus will reign from David’s throne in Jerusalem, and God will place Him “over the house of Jacob forever”.
 - e. *“of his kingdom there will be no end”* – God promised that David’s son would have an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7:13, 16).
 - f. *“He will save His people from their sins”* – Matthew’s gospel adds this phrase to Gabriel’s words. God alone is Savior (Isaiah 43:3, 11). The deity of Jesus is established early on through Gabriel’s testimony.
8. Mary would go on to declare a “song” that highlights how deeply the story of the Old Testament was on her mind as she contemplated the birth of her son. Mary clearly understood that God had promised an offspring to Abraham in whom Israel would be made great and in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). The Apostle Paul also later identifies this descendant as Jesus Himself (Galatians 3:16).

**And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”
(Luke 1:46–55 ESV)**

9. Mary, the Apostles, and the early church understood Jesus’ birth to be a sign of God’s *covenantal faithfulness*. Through His birth, life, death, and resurrection, they were assured that God would fulfill everything that He had promised (Acts 2:14-36; 3:13-26; 13:16-41).

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV)

**“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.””
(Romans 15:8–9 ESV)**

10. It is far too general to say that God promised “to send Jesus to die on the cross for our sins so that we can go to heaven”. Gabriel was announcing that Mary would bear a child who would fulfill God’s promises to David (2 Samuel 7). Her son would rule from Jerusalem and bring to pass everything that God had promised to Israel through His covenants with them.

11. Though we do not yet see Jesus sitting on David's throne in Jerusalem as God had promised, believing Jews and Gentiles have the Holy Spirit as a "guarantee" and "down payment" (2 Corinthians 5:5; Ephesians 1:14) of this future salvation.

"so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."
(Hebrews 9:28 ESV)

12. The "hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20) is the same hope that the Apostle Paul held and preached (Acts 26:6-8) and the same hope that Gentiles have (Ephesians 4:4-6). When Jesus returns and rules from Jerusalem in the age to come in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, those of faith in Him from all nations will be resurrected, all creation will be restored, and the God of Israel will be rightly praised and adored by the Jewish people and the nations.

"For if their [Israel's] rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"
(Romans 11:15 ESV)

13. Our *faith* and *hope* as believers is completely based on God's continuing covenantal faithfulness with national Israel and the Jewish people. Apart from God being faithful to Abraham, Moses, David, and the whole house of Israel in the New Covenant, the rest of the nations will not be *blessed* as God has intended and promised.

14. Therefore, the celebration of the birth of Jesus finds its true, full meaning in context to the Old Testament story and the covenants. The good news we proclaim this Christmas is that God has been faithful and will be faithful to fulfill all of His promises to Israel, and it is through that covenantal faithfulness that all the rest of the nations will be blessed. The long-awaited *seed* has finally been revealed, and we await His return to fulfill everything that God has guaranteed for all those who love His appearing. As the unbelieving world looks at Christmas as another time to decorate pine trees, drink egg nog, hang up colored lights, and go into credit card debt, may we be ones who celebrate the true story of Christmas and bear witness of Jesus not only to them but also to unbelieving Israel.