The Promise
Genesis 3:14-15, Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-23
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Have you ever heard someone say, "*Jesus is the reason for the season?*" It's not a bad phrase. It certainly places the correct emphasis on the fact that Jesus is the reason for the season of Christmas. We all need reminding of that, especially when shopping, vacations, family gatherings, gift-giving, and gift-receiving seem to drive the reason for the season. Not that any of those things are bad. They are not, but they are not the reason we celebrate Advent.

To properly refocus our attention on Jesus as the reason for the season, we should ask: *Why do we celebrate Advent? Why do we celebrate Christmas at all? What is this season all about anyway?*

We celebrate Christmas because Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth to save His people–but why? Why did Jesus come? What is the reason we even have Christmas?

As Pastor Dean preached last Sunday, we have a problem, and we are the problem. We are condemned sinners who are born separated from God by our sin, and if we die in this condition, we will go to Hell for all eternity. What this means is that we need a Savior. So, the season of Advent and Christmas reminds us that Jesus came to earth to save us.

The title of our Advent series: *The Reason We Need Christmas*. This little series is a unique opportunity to focus our attention on Christ in Christmas by deepening our understanding of the true meaning of Christmas.

This morning, we will consider the topic of God's *promise*. Yet, before we dig into the promise God made to His people to fix our sin problem, we must remember how God brought our salvation to us.

Here's what I mean: While we will unpack beautiful doctrines like the virgin birth and the incarnation of the Son of God that are found in Scripture, we need to remember how these doctrines came to us. They primarily were given to us as a story. For our purposes in Advent we focus on *the Christmas story*.

It is the stunning, remarkable story of the birth of the promised Son of God, who came to save His people from their sins. So, the profound doctrines we will unpack are given to us in the captivating story of Jesus' leaving His throne in Heaven and coming into our world as a baby. He was born to the virgin Mary in a barn, laid in a cattle feed feeder, in an obscure village named Bethlehem in Palestine. His adoptive father was named Joseph. He was worshipped by wise men from the east. Then to avoid being killed by King Herod, God sent Jesus and his family to Egypt for safety. Then He brought them back and they settled in Nazareth.

This story is not a myth, it is not legend, it is not fiction, it is true. Only God could work world events so that sinners of their own volition accomplished the will of God to fulfill all of the promises God made over thousands of years in the Old Testament that resulted in the redemption of His chosen people.

I want to ask four questions to help us examine *the promise God made to send Jesus and see how His promise impacts our lives*.

I. Why do we need the Christmas promise or the promise of Jesus?

As Pastor Dean covered last Sunday, Genesis 3 is where our problem began. It is one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. After all of the glorious gifts God had given Adam and Eve, in an act of rebellion, they sinned by disobeying God's wise and holy commandment not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the Garden. When they did, they ushered in a horrible plague of sin that would infect every human heart.

Here's the bottom line: Sin is our greatest problem because it separates us from the God whom we were made to know and designed to enjoy. By our sin, we have separated ourselves from God's love for all eternity. The punishment for our sin is to suffer in a place Jesus calls "*hell.*" It is a place where we will be forever removed from the possibility of ever being in the presence of God or anything good. The Scriptures describe it as a horrible place.

So, there is our greatest problem. As Isaiah says, our sins have separated us and our God, and we have no power to fix our sin problem because it has infected our hearts to make us spiritually dead in our sin.

II. What is the promise of Christmas that resolves our problem of sin? Genesis 3:14-15

I want to pick up our story in Genesis 3, just after the Fall, where Adam and Eve sinned. God was sorting through the mess Adam and Eve had made. As He did, He pronounced consequences on them for their sin.

In Genesis 3:14-15a, God pronounced the judgment on the serpent:

The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring [seed].

So, here we hear the curse God gave the serpent but within that curse, we hear is a glimmer of hope for mankind. Within the curse, God's mercy shone through for His people. He promised to send a Redeemer to save us from our sin. Listen to His pronouncement that is a promise of deliverance in v. 15b:

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring [seed]. He shall bruise[1] your head, and you shall bruise his heel.

Now, here's the deal: when Eve heard this promise, she was not thinking of Jesus. She was thinking of her firstborn, Cain, but he was not the one. If you know Cain's story, you know that Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy.

After this, the theme of the offspring or seed (as in the original text) runs throughout Genesis and the Old Testament. This theme of the promise of the *seed of the woman* seeks fulfillment in the Old Testament, but it doesn't find it. The promise is made and continues on after Genesis.

Pastor/theologian Derek Thomas writes:

No one reading the Bible can miss the connecting threads: God is doing something in the history of Israel that has its genesis [beginning] in a promise given in Eden.

As the story of redemption unfolds in the Old Testament, we learn that there is One coming. In each story of the Old Testament, in each poem, and in each prophecy, you will find the promises of a Redeemer echoed or shadowed in its pages.

In these stories, we find types of redeemers that point us to the coming of the Ultimate Redeemer. As a result, we can look back at Genesis 3:15 and see God was talking about the offspring of the woman who would come and defeat the serpent and break his power over the people of God. He would *crush the head of the serpent.* In the process, the Redeemer would receive a mortal wound. He would be *crushed on the cross for our sin but He would be raised from the dead.*

The prophet Isaiah gives us many Messianic prophecies. Over the years I've preached many Christmas messages from Isaiah. One of the key promises of a Redeemer is found in Isaiah 7:14,

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

Isaiah teaches us that the offspring of the woman will not just be a regular man but God Himself, who came in human flesh. The name *Immanuel* God with us and Scripture teaches that in Christ that was literally what happened.

Have you ever wondered why God would have to come in human flesh? You see, if we only needed education, God would have sent a teacher. If we only needed some tweaking in our behavior, God would have sent a therapist. If we only needed encouragement, God would have sent a motivational speaker. If we only needed more money, God would have made us all rich. If we only needed to get well, God would have sent a doctor. God gave us the Law but we couldn't keep the Law. It didn't work.

We needed much more than we can imagine. As humans, our sin problem runs deep. We all have a heart problem. Our spiritual hearts are dead in sin. We needed to be rescued. We need a Savior who is not simply a man but One who is truly God and truly man. As the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:18,

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself.

Biblical counselor Paul Tripp writes:

It is humbling to accept that God came, in the person of Jesus, to live the way that we were created to live, but [we] would never live. [He died] the death that each one of us deserves to die and [rose] out of the tomb, defeating sin and death because there was simply no other way.

God knew that our condition was so desperately grave that he was willing to go to this extent to reach and rescue us. Ponder the fact that God was willing to control the events of world history to

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[1] Bruise is also translated *crush.* Many translators prefer this translation to show the utter defeat of Satan and also the crushing of Jesus on the cross.

bring this world to the place where conditions were right for Jesus to come, simply because we had no power whatsoever to help ourselves out of our desperate state. Humanity was so incredibly messed up that there was only one solution for us: God himself!

This is the lengths that God went to in order to save you and me. He humbled Himself in Christ, taking the form of a servant.

So, in the New Testament, when Mary discovers that she is expecting a baby, although she had never been with a man, the angel Gabriel tells her that she will have a son. Gabriel told her in Luke 1:32 that "*He will be great.*" Gabriel's words help us connect the redemptive dots because He clearly uses the covenant language of the promise made to Abraham and David.

I love how the Apostle Paul tells us of God's promise to redeem His people at the beginning of his letter to the Romans. I call it the Christmas story in Romans. Listen to what he says in Romans 1:1-3,

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, [3] concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh.

We read about the fulfillment of that promise in the story of the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1:18-23,

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. [19] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. [20] But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. [21] She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." [22] All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: [23] "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Matthew views the birth of Jesus as the climax of God's promises and purposes and that it is the fulfillment of the Old Testament story as a whole.

So, remember how we began this sermon–our sin has placed us in a desperate situation. Something radical had to occur in order to save us from the consequences of our sins.

Friends, the birth of Jesus destroys the idea that we can fix our sin problem. This means the birth of Jesus crushes the idea that our lives even remotely belong to us so that we may live as we choose. The Advent story doesn't allow us to believe we can fix ourselves and make ourselves acceptable to God. The Christmas story confronts us with the depth of our sin and inability to respond to God—the Christmas story zeros in on our helpless condition apart from God's amazing grace. Friends, the Christmas story doesn't just explain our great need, but it also introduces us to the One who came to help us.

The story of Advent is about help coming to earth. When Jesus was born, He lay safely in a manger, but He would soon be beaten and bloodied and be hung from a cross to provide us all the help we desperately need.

In Jesus, we find the promise made and the promise kept. The God-man who came to earth to save the people He created from the consequences of their sin by dying on the cross to pay for their sin and then rising from the dead on the third day. In this act, the promise of Jesus gives us hope.

The promise of Jesus' first coming was always grounded in hope. Now that He has come and fulfilled that promise, he still holds out hope for us in this life. Yet, we, like those before us, still struggle. We still have problems we can't solve. We still struggle with our sin. We still experience pain and suffering. We still go through trials and tribulations in life. We still experience broken dreams, lost dreams, broken families, and broken hearts. What are we to do? How does the coming of Christ in Advent help me? How does His promise give me hope?

III. How does the promise of the Christmas story impact your story?

It's like this: The promise of Jesus in the Christmas story meets the story of our broken lives right where we live.

How does this work? When the promise of Christ in the good news of the gospel meets our sin problem, there is *hope* because we are brought into a love-relationship with Jesus. There is *hope* for gospel-transformation in our lives. Only then is there *hope* for eternity.

Here's the deal: We must abandon trusting in our abilities, like our strength, our intelligence, our power, our money, our support system, or anything else. We must abandon trusting in our attempts at righteousness. We must abandon all to Jesus.

I don't know if you've thought about this, but God has hardwired us to have hope. The promise of life is in that which we place our hope. We long for hope. We are fueled by hope and motivated by hope to the extent that every decision we make, every choice we make, and every response we have to the situations and relationships of our lives moves us toward that hope. Your story, the story of your life, is a hope story.

Think about how your heart and mind work. Some of your happiest moments are when that in which you hope promises happiness and satisfaction. Likewise, your saddest moments are about hope dashed, hope destroyed. What this means is that you're always looking for hope. You're always attaching the hope of your heart to something.

Now, here's what hope is. Hope is always an object and an expectation. You're always hoping in something and asking that something to deliver something to you. That's what hope is. Hope is always an object and always an expectation.

Our problem is we tend to look for hope in all the wrong places. We look for hope where it can't be found, so we're often disappointed, frustrated, and confused. Because we want things to give us hope that just can't provide us with hope.

Only when we give up on all of these "*horizontal man-made hopes*" can we find true hope in the promise of Jesus. If we continue to say things to ourselves like, "*If I only had _____, then my life would be complete, and I would be happy."*

Listen, whatever you fill in the blank within this sentence is a *false hope* and, therefore, a *false savior* for you. It is a hopeless savior. This savior promises peace, security, satisfaction, and completeness. Nothing and no one can be that savior for you. There is only one Savior, and His name is Jesus Christ.[2]

Biblical counselor Paul Tripp illustrates our struggle with man-made hope when he talks about his experience in marriage counseling. Tripp writes:

> *I've had over a hundred wives say this to me. "All I ever wanted was a man who would make me happy." [When she says this] I think, "Well he's cooked. Because that man doesn't have the ability to produce that for you. He can't. He should nourish you, cherish you, serve you and love you of course, but he cannot be the source of your happiness. That will never ever work." What's a biblical view of marriage? It's a flawed person married to a flawed person in a fallen world . . . But with a faithful God.*

Paul Tripp is only talking about marriage here. The question you need to ask yourself is: Where is my hope placed? Perhaps you're single and your hope is placed in a marriage with lifelong companionship of marriage. Perhaps you have a job, but what you really hope for is a satisfying career. Perhaps in the midst of extended family chaos, and all you hope for is the harmony of family peace. Perhaps you're sick and hoping for physical health and strength. Maybe you hoping for enough money to get out of debt and pay your bills. Maybe you are only hoping to afford a dependable car. Perhaps you're a student and you are hoping for success in your final exams. The bottom line is that our hearts are never free from longing for hope.

Listen, that long list of things we long for is not bad. None of those things were sinful in and of themselves. It is when those longings become ultimate in our lives and we say, "*If only I had _____ I would be happy."* that they become sinful man-made hopes.

Jesus calls us to abandon the promises of these false hopes for the assurance of true hope in Christ. We must abandon all to Him. Which leads me to my final question.

IV. Why don't we do it? Why don't we abandon the promise of these false hopes for Jesus in our lives?

A promise made implies patience and perseverance. It implies *faith and hope* as we must wait for the promise to be fulfilled.

Yet, we struggle to wait. We struggle to persevere. We struggle when suffering comes, and the promise of God's deliverance, His peace, and healing is there, but we don't quite experience it. We struggle when we have been burned by someone we love and it is hard to trust others. We wrestle with unbelief. We struggle to hold on to hope in Christ. We struggle when we know the promise of God's love for us, but suffering, stress, and trials hit our lives hard, and so we struggle to believe in God's promise. We struggle to believe God is good. We struggle to believe He loves us and that what He is doing is working for our good.

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[2] Paul Tripp, *Advent–The Promise: Isaiah 59:1-21,* December 5, 2010; also see any and all of David Powlison's writings. These two men unpack the longings and desires of the human heart in very vivid ways.

Saints in the past have always struggled to hope and hold fast to God's promise while waiting for God's rescue and deliverance. They would struggle to believe in God's goodness.

This is where sin always finds a crack in our hope. This is where sin seeks to tempt us to fulfill the promise by our own strength and wisdom. We grow tired of waiting and tell ourselves, "*If it is to be, then it is up to me*."

In the Garden, Adam and Eve failed to believe God's promise. Instead of trusting in God's good word to them that they were made in His image, they chose to sin and abandon God's promise by eating the forbidden fruit.

Likewise, God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son, but when they grew older, they no longer trusted in God's promise, and so they tried to fulfill the promise themselves by having Sarah's maidservant bear the son of promise, and so they sinned.

In Hebrews 11, the writer reminds us of the story of saint after saint who, by faith in the promises of God, endured. They were tempted to turn back and let go of their faith in the promise of God, but they didn't. Then, on the heels of the hall of faith in Hebrews 11, the writer records in Hebrews 12:3-4,

> *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. [4] In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. [5] And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?*

The struggle against sin is not just any sin but to stop persevering in *faith in the promise* of God's deliverance or God's presence with us in our suffering. It is to stop hoping in Christ. *It is the struggle against anger at God and unbelief in the promises of God in Christ for us*.

Those listed in the Hall of faith in Hebrews 11, didn't turn back. Instead they abandoned all and hoped in the promise of God that is found in Christ. As the writer of Hebrews writes at the very beginning of Hebrews 11:1,

> *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

Friends, the question is: Where is your hope? What promise are you holding on to for life? Is it Jesus or some man-made promise of a better life where you are saying to yourself, "*If only _____, then I would be content*?