

Prophecies of Christmas, Pt. 1
Dancing on a Thread of Hope
Genesis 3: 15; Numbers 24:17; Deut.18: 15-18

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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

I was quite young when I realized I needed a champion. Someone to set things right after the world went crazy. I'm very grateful that the evening I discovered my need for a defender, I found one in my big brother. Growing up, we lived in the upstairs of my grandparents' house. On Thursdays, we would eat all together downstairs with a formal meal. These tended to be long meals and sometimes I would be allowed to get up from the table and go play outside while the others talked. This particular night, I was probably 5 or 6, I went outside and began a walk around the block. I had both clear freedom and clear boundaries. We had sidewalks around our whole block, and friends in nearly every house, so I was free even at a young age to go anywhere on our block. But I was forbidden to cross the streets by myself, even the rather sleepy side street on the back of the block. Because of this boundary, the twenty feet to the other side of the street was like a vast ocean. The houses over there were another country, and so were the children who lived there. As I happily rounded the corner, no doubt engaged in some fantasy of being a soldier or a space traveler, suddenly some older kids were coming across the street. They blocked my path. I didn't know the kid who stood before me. He might as well have been from another land. But he acted like this block was his, and always had been. Who was I to think I could pass down this sidewalk without his permission? He told me in no uncertain terms that I could never come again to this place I had known all my life. To emphasize his point, he spat in my face. I'd never been spit on before. But I didn't need an explanation of its meaning. It was gross, humiliating and a sign of domination. I turned around and went home, trying hard not to cry.

When I came back into the dining room, the family could see I was upset. I told them what had happened. The back block had been taken over by these kids from across the street. "Come on," my brother said. Now my brother is ten years older than I am, so if I was 5 or 6, he was 15 or 16. The kids who confronted me were probably just 7 or 8. My brother picked me up and put me on his shoulders. He began walking down the sidewalk to the back block. I felt like I was fifty feet tall. We found the kids. On my brother's shoulders, they didn't look very scary any more. My brother was running the show now. He called them over. No blows were struck. Only a few words were said. But the message was clear: "Mess with

my little brother again and you're messing with me. Wherever you hide, I will find you. And you seriously don't want that." Just for emphasis, we walked slowly all the way down their supposed territory. I never feared to go there again. They never messed with me. I had a champion. A defender. He put the world to rights.

I wish life and the world could work out with such simple justice. Why can't this formula always work: Mean people. Scary situation. Big kids. Bigger brother. No worries. We long for a champion who will not just clear the block of bullies, but restore the world to flourishing. We want a defender for the weak, a guide for the lost, a voice for the sidelined, a redeemer for the enchained, a champion for the helpless, and a righteous judge for the oppressed. Please, just put me on your shoulders and go take care of this. The world is not the way it's supposed to be. We need someone with the power to fix it.

That's the ancient hope of God's people. Come to us! Save us! Restore the world to the way you intended it to be. That's the hope of the season of advent. As you know, advent means arrival, or coming. It is the time when we prepare to celebrate the arrival of God in our midst at Christmas. We do so by stepping into the story, imagining for a few days that we don't know how the story ends. We join with the people who were longing for God to come and clean all this up. It's not really that hard to imagine. Because we know we're *still* longing for God to come and clean up this world. Yes, he came to us in Jesus Christ as our savior and defender. But we all know the work is not completed. The world is still groaning and warring and crying and dying. We are waiting for Christ to return. We enter our celebration of his first advent, his first coming by becoming freshly aware of how much we long for his second advent, his arrival again in glory to renew the earth.

This year, we're going to trace the thread of hope that runs through Scripture. It goes all the way back to the first book of the Bible. We're going to look at some of the prophecies that foretold the coming of a savior to God's people. Some of these prophecies are just hints, precious clues to which people clung as they waited for God to act. Some are bright proclamations that set our heart singing. Today, we're going to start with some of the oldest promises of a champion and consider how they were fulfilled in Jesus.

1) The Head Crusher: Genesis 3 gives us the first promise of the ultimate redemption God has for us. To understand the promise, we have to reckon with the heap of trouble humanity has been in. The Bible tells the story of a loving God creating a good earth. He made human beings for a life of communion with God,

love with one another, and loving dominion over the earth. But we fell from such grace. We chose against the Lord. Our good nature was ruined. Death entered the world and creation became disordered. Ever since we have been in bondage to the futility of living and striving only to see it all fall apart. We're in a mess. We are cut off from the God we long for. We miss him so badly that sometimes it feels like we just hate him. Our relationships are disordered. We hurt most the ones we love the most. We have a dream of how life should be but can't ever get there. We are a wreck and a ruin. Yet even from the beginning a thread of hope was sewn into our story.

To the serpent who tempted them, the LORD said,

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; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel (Genesis 3: 14-15).

Amidst the death sentence we had earned, the LORD God yet offered the promise of a champion. We would be cursed with our ruined nature, but God would not be deprived of his ultimate goal to be in communion with us. For centuries, Christian commentators have seen in Genesis 3 a promise of the Christ. Eve was promised offspring. That word can be understood, of course, as every person who would come after her. We are all offspring of Adam and Eve. But that word can also be understood as one particular offspring. The Seed of Eve was the eternal Son of God born of the Virgin's womb. This seed of Eve, her offspring, would be in deadly combat with the serpent. The serpent would strike the offspring of Eve as dire blow, a blow like a cross. But the Seed of Eve would strike a killing blow upon the serpent. "He will bruise your head." This blow would be unto everlasting defeat. Though the serpent had tempted us into ruin, the Offspring of Eve would slay the serpent and restore our ruined nature.

Jesus born at Christmas, accomplished this victory in his life, death, resurrection and glorious ascension. He bruised the head of the serpent. He restored lost humanity. He opened up heaven to us. Of course, this side of heaven, the struggle is not over. We look to Jesus and we are saved. But the old nature, the ruined Man is still inside us. So in Advent, as we celebrate God's arrival in the baby Jesus, we also cry out for him to come to each of us. We pray that he would work in our hearts. Charles Wesley wrote, in an often overlooked verse of "Hark, the Herald Angels,

Rise, the woman's conquering seed, /bruise in *us* the serpent's head.
Now display Thy saving power, /Ruin'd nature now restore.

Promised Savior, conquering king, come slay the serpent inside us. Rise up Jesus and smash the evil nature of my old life. As Wesley wrote elsewhere, "Take away our bent to sinning." Lord, make me new again. The advent hope is that we have a champion who will do just that.

2) The Prophet like Moses. In Deuteronomy, Moses gave the people final instructions before they were to enter the Promised Land. Moses himself would not make it over the Jordan. But he gave his people hope that one day the LORD would send another prophet like him when they needed him most. "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen...And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (Deut. 18: 15,18).

For centuries the people must have puzzled over what Moses meant. Who would be this prophet equal to him in stature? As I studied, I first thought, "Well what's the big deal about that? Just another prophet? How does that help?" But then I pondered a bit more carefully just who Moses was and what he did.

- Moses encountered the LORD at the burning bush, the bush which burned with flames but was not consumed. He heard God speak to him directly.
- Moses spoke to Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people and boldly demanded that they be set free.
- Moses performed miraculous signs that guaranteed that the world would change.
- Moses directed the people to put the blood of the lamb on their doors so the angel of death would pass by them on the night of the final plague.
- Moses led his people through the parted waters of the Red Sea, through certain death into freedom.
- Moses received the commandments directly from the LORD and relayed them to the people. The LORD made known his will for his people through Moses,

- He sealed the covenant between the LORD and his people with a bowl of blood he threw on them declaring, “The blood of the covenant.”
- He prayed for food for the people and manna from heaven came down every day. He struck the rock in the desert and water gushed forth.
- He interceded with the LORD on behalf of the people when they sinned.

To crow it all, we read that the LORD regularly spoke with Moses “as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33: 11). They would meet inside the cloud of God’s glory. They had intimate conversation.

When you consider it, how could there ever be a prophet as great as Moses again? No man could endure the presence of God’s glory as Moses did. No man could know God so intimately. No man could speak God’s Word so clearly. To be greater than Moses you’d have to be, well, you’d have to be God himself with his people. Yet the prophecy is that God would raise up this new Moses from among flesh and blood people. Who could possibly have such intimacy with God yet be a man? Who could possibly speak with more authority than Moses yet do with a human voice? Who could be both divine and human?

Jesus in his ministry taught Moses. Whenever he said, “You have heard it said,” he quoted Moses. But then Jesus would add, “But I say...” He spoke as one who had known God as Father from all eternity. So he would outrageously declare, “I do nothing on my own authority, but I speak *just* as the Father taught me” (Jn. 8: 28). “I and the Father are one.” Straight out, Jesus just claimed the Deuteronomy prophecy for himself, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me (Jn. 5: 46).

Jesus, of course, spoke truth to the religious leaders who kept people bound in legalism. He spoke in power to the evil powers that bound people and set them free. He performed signs of healing, raised the dead, and forgave sins like he was God. In every way he demonstrated the world will be made right. Evil and death will not have the last word.

He lifted the cup in the Upper Room and declared with Moses’ own words, “This is the blood of the covenant.” And he himself became the Passover Lamb

when his blood was shed on the cross. And he becomes our Redeemer as we receive that blood on the doorposts of our hearts. Jesus passed through the Red Sea of Death and opened up entrance to the Promised Land. Along our journey home, he feeds us with the manna of his body, the bread of heaven. He intercedes for us even now, constantly before his Father taking up our cause. Jesus is the prophet like Moses. Only miraculously more. For he fulfilled all the works and the teachings of Moses and gave us access to the throne of grace through himself. He is the Son of God who unites us to himself.

The clues were given way back in the beginning. One would come, an offspring of Eve to crush the evil one under his foot. One would come to be a prophet like Moses, but with even more authority and power. A champion would come. A defender and a redeemer. He came to clear the block of bullies. To put us on his shoulders and carry us safely home.

In Advent, we rejoice in his first arrival. We pray out our longing for his return. We know it's not over yet. We know there's more. We work for it, long for it, worship for it and pray for it. Maranatha. Lord Jesus come back! You are our big brother. You can make the world right again. You can clear the way. The prophecies of his arrival give us courage that our hope is not in vain. His arrival was predicted, and he came on time. His return is also prophesied. And he will come on time. Even so, come Lord Jesus! Into our hearts with hope this day. Into our world with saving grace. Be our defender and our champion.