

FAR AS
THE CURSE
IS FOUND

THE COVENANT STORY
OF REDEMPTION

MICHAEL D. WILLIAMS


P U B L I S H I N G
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PREFACE

Noted author and scholar C. S. Lewis believed that Christianity is a life-and-death issue for all people. To be born into this world means “either an eternal surrender to God or an everlasting divorce from Him.”¹ Yet, Lewis noted that few people seem to know what Christianity is all about. Walter Hooper recounts a conversation with Lewis:

One day he and I were speculating as to what would happen if a group of friendly and inquisitive Martians suddenly appeared in the middle of Oxford and asked (those who did not flee) what Christianity is. We wondered how many people, apart from voicing their prejudices about the Church, could supply them with much in the way of accurate information. On the whole, we doubted whether the Martians would take back to their world much that is worth having.²

Lewis and Hooper are right: most people—believers as well as non-Christians—cannot give a credible answer to the question What is Christianity about?

How do we account for this state of affairs? Given the life-and-death urgency of Christianity, we stand desperately in need of a rever-

1. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 9.

2. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

sal of the damning disparity between the eternal importance of the Christian faith and the apprehension of it by its advocates. Christianity is a revelatory religion. This means that God has revealed himself, his ways, and his will most clearly and fully in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Christianity is, therefore, a religion of the book. Thus, if believers do not understand the core issues of the Christian religion, it is because they fail to grasp or appreciate the Bible in some fundamental way.

Why might people have failed to understand or appropriate the message of the Bible? It can be a confusing book. To the casual reader it might appear a perplexing mix of historical stories, legal codes, doctrinal discourses, apocalyptic tales, morality plays, and proverbial sayings. Yet we confess that the Bible is the Word of God. This implies that we expect it to comprise a coherent message within a unified whole. If not, we should not call it the Word of God but perhaps the words of God or an anthology of revelation (*The Best of Yahweh* or *God's Greatest Hits*).

When we look a bit more closely at the Bible, we find that the majority of its content is narrative in character. It is a storied revelation. This fact suggests that the unifying, insight-producing feature that gives the Bible its coherence as revelation is the story it tells. Indeed, the Bible as a whole is best understood as a story or drama. To be sure, the Bible does more than tell a story. Scripture includes psalms and proverbs, songs and prayers, moral instruction and doctrinal reflection. But what holds all of it together, what makes it a unified revelation is the storyline, what theologians often call the drama of redemption. The nonnarrative pieces fit into and make sense only within their appropriate contexts in the biblical storyline.

Every good story has at least four fundamental elements. The first element of a story or narrative drama is the prologue, an introduction to the principal characters and their starting relationships. The prologue also sets the stage for the unfolding drama, the context within which the story will transpire. Any good story will also include a conflict that arises and that the characters must face. The conflict forms the dramatic problem of the story. Third, the conflict must be resolved or dealt with in some fashion. And finally, there is a sum-

ming up or a conclusion in which the reader or listener is told how the original relationships were modified by the dramatic problem and its resolution.

In its most basic structure, the Bible follows this dramatic pattern. It has an introduction, a dramatic problem that arises, a resolution to the problem, and a summing up or conclusion. We might refer to these four elements within the biblical storyline as creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The story that the Bible relates has a prologue that sets the context for the entire drama: God's creation of a wonderful universe. It describes a conflict of cosmic proportions: our first parents' fall into sin and God's response to their sin in covenant curse. Yet the biblical story does not end there. In the midst of God's judgment of sin, the Bible presents the resolution to the fall in God's mighty acts that judge sin and bring redemption, deeds which culminate in God's redemptive purpose in Jesus Christ. Finally, the Bible's story ends with a summing up: God brings his creation and humankind to his promised consummation. "The essence of the Christian religion consists in this," said Herman Bavinck, "that the creation of the Father, devastated by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God, and recreated by the Holy Spirit into the kingdom of God."³ The triune God acts covenantally in history: the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit recreates.

The creation-fall-redemption-consummation storyline is the central theme of Scripture, and it forms the Bible's overarching literary structure. This storyline, in its given sequence, is fundamental to the drama Scripture relates. Each successive event in the story assumes the entire preceding sequence. Creation is the environment that the fall and redemptive events modify. Fall and redemption are meaningless outside of the context of God's good creation. From what do we fall? God's good creational intention. To what standard are we redeemed? God's intention that his creatures glorify him, an intention given in creation. Creation is the presupposition of the fall story,

3. Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Kampen: Kok, 1928), 1:89.

and creation and fall together are the presupposition of the history of redemption centering in Jesus Christ.

As the story that Christians believe is the one true story that tells us the truth about God, ourselves, and our world, the Bible is a progressive revelation. God's revelation of his response to sin and its effects upon humankind and the world takes place not in an instant but rather over centuries, through a series of redemptive historical acts. These special events in the biblical story are often characterized by covenant making or are otherwise typified as covenantal in character.

But what does history have to do with the covenant? And what is a covenant? While no single definition of covenant can do it justice, a covenant is nothing less than a historical relationship between persons. To say that a personal relationship is historical is to state the obvious, but it is this very reality that is so often overlooked when we talk about God's ways and relationships. God works in history, which is to say that he works covenantally. God enters into relationship with his people, which is to say that he calls them into covenant.

God's promises to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David find their culmination and definitive fulfillment in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:20). He is both the goal and the key to "the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12), for the entire biblical story pivots upon Jesus of Nazareth. Thus we will begin our discussion with Christ. Indeed we begin with the resurrection. While it might seem odd at first that our telling of the story begins at Easter morning, the empty tomb is the most fitting time and place to embark upon the drama of redemption and the covenantal purpose of God that undergirds it. All that comes before Christ's victory in rising from the dead looks forward to it, and all that comes after the resurrection in the biblical story is an explication of it.

The theme that undergirds the first two chapters is that the Christian religion and its gospel are about God's acts in our world on our behalf. Dorothy Sayers had it right when she wrote:

That man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed. Any journalist, hearing of it for the first time, would recognize it as News; those who did hear of it for the first time actually called it News, and good news at that, though we are apt to forget that the word *Gospel* ever meant anything so sensational.

Perhaps the drama is played out now, and Jesus is safely dead and buried. Perhaps. It is ironical and entertaining to consider that once at least in the world's history those words might have been spoken with complete conviction, and that was upon the eve of the Resurrection.⁴

Biblical religion holds that the central event in all human history was the execution of a wandering first-century Palestinian preacher and his rising from the dead two days later in fulfillment of God's covenant promises. This is the gospel. To return to Lewis's and Hooper's question: What is the real issue of Christianity? We must answer that the biblical story is the message of the God who "so loved the world" as to enter into it, and ultimately to die for it. What was promised to Adam and Eve in the midst of their guilt and shame, what was prefigured over and over again throughout the Old Testament story of Israel (another story often characterized by guilt and shame) came to pass in a Judean backwater town when God "became flesh and made his dwelling with us." As Sayers so powerfully puts it: "When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile."⁵

All of this suggests that the Christian religion is not an ethereal or eternal doctrine about the nature of deity or a polite philosophical discussion about the relation of spirit to matter but the historical unfolding of God's covenantal involvement in the world, the acme of which is God's coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. It is unfortunate that when many believers think of revelation or doctrine, what comes to mind all too often is a somewhat sterile collec-

4. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 1949), 9.

5. *Ibid.*, 4.

tion of eternal ideas and notions about a transcendent and unchanging realm of pure thought, a realm that is safely removed from this world and its vicissitudes, alterations, and complexities.

The saving events to which Scripture testifies, however, take place within our world. It is the history of this world—not some metaphysically timeless heaven—that is the sphere of God’s redemptive plan. It is in history that he triumphs over humanity’s sin through Christ and reconciles the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19). It is in history that God acts to bring man to himself. To be sure, God is transcendent; he stands supremely above our world in immutable majesty. But the biblical story is that God is neither locked up in heaven nor remains there. He is ever the coming one, condescending to his creatures in order to forge relationship, judge sin, redeem his people, shower them with the benefits of Christ, and ultimately to bring them and his creation to the consummation of recreation. And God’s way in all this, his way in the historical drama, is the way of covenant.

What shall we say to Lewis’s and Hooper’s religious seekers from another planet? Bavinck’s answer that Christianity is a trinitarian story is an excellent start. Handing the Martians a copy of the Apostles’ Creed, also a trinitarian drama, would do as well, for the creed has served that very purpose for the better part of two millennia. This book is not written for inquisitive Martians but for those who would tell the story. To tell it we must first hear it ourselves. And to tell it as it is—a dynamic historical drama of God’s creative and redemptive actions within our world—we must hear the unfolding story of the covenant.

Our goal is to tell the biblical story through the episodic unfolding of God’s covenant way in history. The first two chapters will concentrate on the two premier redemptive events in Scripture: the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egypt in the Old. These two chapters of the redemptive drama were—and are—fundamental moments in God’s revelation of his true character, his historical purpose, and the destiny of his covenant people. We will then follow the covenant storyline of Scripture from creation to new creation by examining each of the

Preface

biblical episodes in the developing drama. This will constitute the greater part of our study. Finally, we will examine the question of Christ's relationship to each of the covenant episodes, and briefly reflect upon the postbiblical epoch in covenantal perspective by asking what significance the covenant has for those who live the contest of faith in what Lewis called "the cosmic spring" of the resurrection.

I

THE RESURRECTION

The Single Best Page of the Story

This book is a retelling of the biblical story of God’s unfolding covenant relationship with his people. The case has been made that it is important to see that the Bible tells a story. Like all stories, the biblical drama has a sequence that must be honored in the retelling. For it to be the story that it is, we must tell about the way things were at the beginning, what went wrong, how it was resolved, and how it ended. Each episode sets the context for the next. It is critical to the story to set human rebellion and God’s redemption in the context of the beginning of the story, God’s creation. If you don’t, you end up with a different story.

Nevertheless, this first chapter begins with Jesus—God come in the flesh and raised from the dead. Is this to deface the storied character of the Bible’s witness? No. Rather, it underscores that the story is the unfolding drama of God’s coming to and redeeming his treasured people. It is to say that the story is all about Jesus. Jesus is, as C. S. Lewis noted, “the chapter on which the whole plot turns.” Beginning as we are with Jesus, we are taking a peek ahead to see what the story is about.

IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

The Story's Early Chapters Point to Jesus

Beginning with Jesus highlights the fact that the early chapters of the story point to a future resolution. Moving through them we ought to see that they draw us into patterns that intimate an as-yet unrevealed final word. The Old Testament is an uncompleted story, a promise waiting for its fulfillment. Jesus is that fulfillment. He is the one who was to come, that one to whom all the law and prophets witness. There is a sense in which we cannot understand the beginning chapters apart from what they point to. Nor, once Jesus has come, can we read the Old Testament Scriptures without reference to him. Jesus changes everything. Isaiah, writing of the man of sorrows, could never have predicted Jesus of Nazareth. But we, having known Jesus of Nazareth, can no longer read Isaiah 53 without him in mind.

In Jesus We Glimpse the Final Chapter

Jesus is the one to which the early chapters point. Jesus is also a sneak preview of the last chapter. Once we see Jesus, God's final Word, we can tell how the story is going to turn out. Jesus is the beginning of the end of the ages. In Jesus we get a good idea of what God is up to. We see it best in Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead. God's unstoppable goal is nothing less than the restoration of his good creation, the eradication, not of it but of the sin that has damaged it, even the triumph of the body over death itself. We cannot write the story of future intervening years. But we don't have to. We have a view of the end that we need to give us hope for each day: Jesus risen from the dead.

Jesus Sheds Light on the Character and Intentions of God

So Jesus is the key to the story. Jesus is the key, as well, because he expresses undeniably the character and intentions of the story's protagonist, God. If we think that the biblical story is about how we can ascend to God, we have it completely wrong. God is the one who comes to his people to enter into intimate covenant relationship with

them and to be with them forever. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, comes in the flesh. The Old Testament draws us to recognize and respond in love to the coming God. The final chapters of Revelation confirm that God's dwelling with his people, ever his concern from the beginning, is his ultimate goal in which he will ultimately be satisfied. But his best expression of himself, the one that had we been there we could have touched, is Jesus.

Jesus Makes the Story Our Story

Jesus is the key to the story, finally, because he is the Christian's Redeemer. He is the one who by his death purchases us for God. He is our way into the story, the one who makes the story ours. He is the one who opens our eyes to see it and embrace it. We do not come to God, first of all, by looking at his creation. In fact, without Jesus, we cannot rightly grasp the significance of his creation. For us then, the story begins with Jesus.

In this we identify with Thomas, Jesus' disciple. We, like him, behold Jesus. In John's Gospel, Thomas delivers the punch line of the story, the crowning confession of the gospel. Thomas confesses the reality of Jesus' bodily, public resurrection, and he expresses its ultimate significance. For us to grasp the drama of redemption in its fullness, for our lives to be changed by it as his was, we must understand what Thomas understood.

THOMAS AND THE EVIDENCE OF TOUCH

We tend to recall about the apostle Thomas simply that he doubted. What's more, the church has often condemned him for this doubt. The hymn "These Things Did Thomas Count as Real" criticizes Thomas as being unspiritual because he wanted physical evidence of the resurrection:

The vision of his skeptic mind
was keen enough to make him blind
to any unexpected act
too large for his small world of fact.

After a lecture I once gave on the importance of Christ's resurrection for our understanding of redemption, a woman, looking increasingly disturbed, stabbed her hand into the air: "You're making way too much of this bodily resurrection stuff," she complained. "According to 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection was a spiritual event, not a physical one. You're just like Thomas. You want a Jesus you can touch."

Yes, Thomas wanted physical evidence. But Christians have often gotten the story wrong: Thomas was right, not wrong, to want it.

A Jesus You Can Touch—among the Disciples

On that first Easter evening, Jesus' disciples huddled together behind securely locked doors, hiding from the Jewish rulers who had engineered Jesus' arrest and death, and who might, for all the disciples knew, be targeting them. Into this fear-tinged atmosphere suddenly came Jesus. Is this a ghost, they wondered? Apparently, belief in ghosts was easier to accept than resurrection from the dead, for the resurrection stories were discarded as idle talk.¹ Yet here he was, right before their eyes, fully as physical as he had been three days before, when they had witnessed him beaten and then dying.

The disciples recognized the risen Jesus. He spoke and they heard him with their ears. John the writer goes out of his way to mention that Jesus showed the disciples his hands, which had been nailed to the cross, and his side, which had been punctured by the soldier's spear. The marks on his body not only declared the cost of the *shalom* he had won for them but also established that Jesus, the one who died, was now present bodily among them. According to Luke, he even ate some boiled fish in their presence, showing that he was

1. Those who had not actually seen the risen Christ for themselves refused to accept the stories. The responses of the disciples to the resurrected Christ (Luke 24:37), Thomas's reaction (John 20), and the responses of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers to Paul's proclamation of the resurrection (Acts 17:16–34) suggest that the idea of a dead man living again was no less intellectually scandalous for people of the first century than it is for us. They had no more natural reason to accept the idea of resurrection than we do, and their suspicion of the resurrection story shows that they were not naturally bent toward a superstitious and gullible frame of reference.

physically there (Luke 24:42–43). I do not mean to be sacrilegious, but Luke’s account almost suggests that Jesus said, “I haven’t eaten a thing in three days. Anybody have a fish sandwich?” When the disciples were faced with the body of evidence (if you will excuse the pun), confronted with the Word become flesh, and shown the wounds of his struggle, wounds that demonstrated his triumph over death, they had to believe.

The subsequent multiple appearances of Christ tell the same story. Even though the Jewish officials and the Roman military took every possible precaution to secure the body in the tomb, the grave and the supposed finality of death could not hold the Lord of life. Except for a few grave clothes, everything that went into the grave came out. Both the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances argue for a bodily resurrection, a physical continuity between Jesus’ preburial and resurrection life. “Death could not hold its prey.” By the power of God, Christ is risen.

And when God resurrects, he goes big time. This is no merely spiritual resurrection in the hearts of those who desperately wanted Jesus to live again. If the resurrection were anything other than a physical, historical event, the empty tomb story is unnecessary and irrelevant. In fact, it is misleading. The body is not and cannot be in the tomb, because it is risen.

The disciples cowering in the upper room came face to face with a physical, fish-eating Jesus. His tangibility was just the point: God had raised Jesus bodily from the dead.

A Jesus You Can Touch—with Thomas

One of the disciples was not present at Jesus’ first appearance. When the others told Thomas that they had seen Jesus, their statement was met with blank incredulity. Thomas must have surmised that the others had fallen prey to wishful thinking. But he was not going to be taken in. Even when they told him how they had identified the Lord by the nail prints and the spear wound, Thomas was not persuaded. Even seeing would not be enough for him. Only if he put his finger into the nail prints and his hand into the spear wound

would he believe. Only the evidence of touch would convince him of solid flesh. Quite literally the text reads: “If I do not see . . . and put my finger . . . I will never believe” (John 20:25).

With that statement Thomas has come down to us as doubting Thomas, Thomas the skeptic, Thomas the crass materialist. But Thomas doubted no more than the others. The other disciples had thought the resurrection story an idle tale until Jesus appeared to them and proved the tale true. His bodily appearance among them had moved them to belief.

A week later they were all in the house again, with doors shut and bolted, as before. This time, Thomas was present. Jesus came and greeted them. The Lord had a special word for Thomas. He extended his hands and invited Thomas to use his sense of touch as well as sight. “Put your finger here: see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side.” And Jesus extended the further invitation: “Stop your disbelieving, and become a believer.”

Without any further demonstration Thomas burst forth with the greatest confession of the gospel story: “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). He may have been slower than his fellow disciples to believe in the risen Christ, but when he did so, he expressed his faith in language that went beyond that of the other ten disciples.

Like all the others mentioned in John 20, Thomas believed because he had seen. Peter and John had seen the empty tomb and grave clothes. Mary had seen, heard, and touched the Lord. The disciples had examined the wounds left upon his body by the crucifixion. For all of them, physical evidence, Jesus Christ bodily risen from the grave, was the crucial item that moved them to belief.

Jesus also said to Thomas: “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). This was a special message for the Gospel’s first readers as well as for those who read it today. Those first readers had not physically seen the Lord. Neither have we. We belong to that group of people who asked John to write it down, to get it on paper, to tell us about Jesus. Since the passing of the apostolic generation, all believers in the crucified and risen Lord have believed without see-

ing. To them is assured the special blessing pronounced here by Jesus. Today we do not have living witnesses, but we have the inspired record of those who were witnesses, of those who heard, and saw, and touched the Word of life (1 John 1:1–4). But they were witnesses because they touched him.

Thomas didn't miss the point. Perhaps more emphatically than anyone else, he got it. Your faith and mine rests on a resurrected Jesus who can be touched. And when you put your own fingers in the wounds, the realization can't help but rock your world: This is Jesus embodied—"My Lord and my God!"

THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY: THE WORD BECAME FLESH

Thomas understood that for Jesus to have been resurrected, Jesus would have to be bodily the same physical Jesus after as before. Thomas also understood that for Jesus to be the fulfillment of God's ultimate promise, Jesus would have to be bodily the same physical Jesus as before. Touching Jesus in that moment, Thomas knew that Jesus was God, and God's Messiah.

The promise of the Old Testament, the subject of later chapters in this book, was that God would come to his people, that he would come to dwell with his people, that he would come and stay. God's Messiah would make God visible, approachable, present—God in the flesh, embodied, particular, with us because he is one of us. Thomas was right to settle for nothing less than what he could touch. And having touched Jesus after the resurrection, he grasped—literally—that God had come in the flesh, fulfilling his central promise.

Thomas's confession constitutes the climax of John's Gospel, for it confirms the proclamation of the book's prologue: The Word was in the beginning; it was with God; it was God (John 1:1). And Jesus of Galilee is that Word made flesh (John 1:14). Thomas, looking at embodied Jesus, confessed, "My Lord and my God!" John's case is made.

Jesus—the Logos

John asserts that the Word is God. The Greek word that John used for “word” is *logos*. The philosophers of ancient Greece held that true reality is both unchanging and rational, distinct from and underlying the ever-changing world that we sense. They used *logos* to refer to the underlying rational principle that gives order and stability to our world. But where the Greeks thought of “word” as “thought,” the Hebrews used their word *dabar*, which translates into Greek as *logos*, as “deed.” For the Greek, *logos* was the unchanging essence of reality, but for the Hebrew the *logos* was dynamic, having the power to effect and affect reality. For the Hebrew, the word is historical; for the Greek, intellectual or mental.²

John, like the Old Testament authors, thought in concrete historical terms. The *logos* is not just a word, as vocal speech, but also deed. What after all is a word but a vocal event? How does God create? By his word: “And God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light’ ” (Gen. 1:3). By his word, his explosive action, the heavens were made. The *logos* did not refer to an idea in the mind or some abstract principle of order. For John it referred to the creative power of God. Notice the intentional allusions to Genesis 1 in John’s prologue. The Hebrew God acts, and he acts in history.

Thus, the Word became flesh, the fullest conceivable expression of a dynamic God who acts in history and who promises his people that he will come to them. Unlike the *logos* of the Greeks, this Word is a historical event by nature. The *logos*, the Greek principle of all order, does not enter and cannot enter physically into the world. The Greeks often dismissed history as unworthy of philosophical interest. History was no more than the sphere of endless and repetitive

2. James Barr’s *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961) took the biblical theology movement of the 1950s to task for what Barr judged to be its overly easy distinctions between the Greek and Hebrew “mind.” While accepting the warning that the idea of a national mind is abstract and that the distinctions between the Greek and Hebrew mind can be overstressed, it is nevertheless the case that there existed a decidedly different worldview among the Greek philosophers than that which we see in the Old Testament. Further, I would also argue that the worldview commitments a person or nation hold will influence the linguistic choices and usages possible for them.

change. Meaning could be found only in transcendence, the explicit rejection of history. The Greeks tended to think spatially and statically rather than historically. Man's historical, creaturely life seemed an obstacle to his true being. The highest good could be attained only through liberation from the appetites and drives of historical existence. As endless and meaningless change, history was without purpose, without a goal. The essence of perfection was the changeless realm of eternal ideas, and such changeless perfection could not arise from the contingencies of human history. The *logos* may be the principle of the world, but for the Greeks it was foolishness to suggest that it could become historical, that it could become part of the world.

John 1:14 declares: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." In three simple words, John turns the religious thought of the first century on its ear. "Word became flesh." The connection with the first sentence of John's Gospel cannot be overlooked. The one who was in the beginning with God, and who was in fact God himself, became flesh. That is history, an observable and datable event. In space and time God took on humanity. Just as each one of us was born into the world, the Word, Jesus Christ, who was in the beginning with God and who was God, was born into the world and became flesh. John the Evangelist sought to contextualize the gospel story for a Hellenistic culture, even as he signaled to the Hebrews that Jesus was just what they expected God to be: the God who comes to be with his people.

John brought the *logos* into the stuff of creation and of history. The one who was God became flesh and blood, with all the limitations of space and time, all its physical handicaps of fatigue, hunger, and susceptibility to the vicissitudes of earthly existence. The power that called the world into being takes on the weakness of createdness. The one who is truly God is now so truly man that the word *flesh* can be used to describe him. Contrary to the universality and changelessness sought by the philosophies of the Greeks, John declares that meaning and truth are to be found in historical particularity, a specific, particular, historical person. The *logos* is the man Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, executed as a heretic and polit-

ical criminal thirty years later in Jerusalem. There is nothing abstract or universal here. John drives home his point: In Jesus the incarnate Word of God made his home with us. He ate our food and drank our water. As a boy, he was taught carpentry by Joseph. He swung hammers, pushed planes, sawed lumber. The second person of the Trinity made chairs. He entered completely into the affairs of this world.

Jesus—Yahweh Dwelling with His People, Made Flesh

In Christ's becoming flesh, and dwelling among us, the glorious presence of the Lord of the universe is manifested to all creation. In Jesus' body, his physical, this-worldly body, his flesh, God is seen and his glory is manifested to man. To see the glory of God, his making himself present in this world, to see God's restoration of humanity and creation, one must look upon the flesh of Jesus Christ. "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18). Making God known is the particular business of Jesus: making the coming God of Old Testament promise the present God, showing us up close and personal (in the flesh!) the character and ways of the Creator. In Jesus of Nazareth, God is brought near, made close, personal, available to his people. In the incarnation God enters a young girl's womb and comes into our world to begin the long and blood-covered path to restore and regenerate, to reclaim again all creation, and to fulfill the covenant promise: I will be your God, and you will be my people.

Why must God come to his people? John knows the witness of the Old Testament: God's people need a Savior, one who will redeem them. God must go so far as to provide himself a lamb. The God of all creation, the God who measures out the heavens in the span of his hand and sifts out the galaxies as you might sprinkle salt on your evening meal, had long ago determined that there was but one way that his sin-scarred world could be cleansed of the corruption of sin. God must become man in order to suffer the penalty of sin and guilt. God must come, embodied in history, and as the one who saves.

Throughout John's Gospel runs the refrain: Come and see, the Messiah is here! Behold the Lord. He performs signs, solidly mate-

rial deeds demonstrating who he is, so that we might believe in him. John's telling of the gospel story is thoroughly this-worldly. His one all-consuming point is that God has acted visibly and definitively in Christ in order to take away the sin of the world. Thus, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims: "Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He's the one, the one I told you about, the promised Messiah of God. And there he is. *Look!*

John the Baptist's confession expresses the gospel's one fundamental proclamation: Jesus is the Lamb of God—God present with his people, with them in flesh and history, poised to save. Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God!" If it's Jesus, and his is a pierced, resurrected, body, here with us, then Jesus has to be our God. Thomas's confession does not merely acknowledge the reality of the resurrection but also expresses its ultimate significance: Jesus is the conqueror of death because he is none other than the creator of life. Now the story is told. The wound of the Garden is healed. On resurrection morning God was able again to say what he had exclaimed over his creation so long ago: "It is good. It is very good."

It matters that Jesus was restored bodily, because it signaled that Jesus was the Creator and promised Redeemer who covenants with his people, who promises to come to them, and who keeps his promises. Jesus the one and only has made Yahweh known. With Thomas we confess that he is God, and we are his.

THE RESURRECTION PREVEWS THE FINAL CHAPTER: THE RESTORATION OF CREATION

The flesh Jesus takes on in the incarnation is a flesh he never lays down. It is there in his ministry: Immanuel, God with us, come in the flesh to cure his broken world. And that same flesh, repaired, renewed, and glorified in resurrection, is there in the risen and ascended Christ. In Jesus' bodily resurrection we view with Thomas the very meaning of the resurrection: the restoration of creation.

G. C. Berkouwer once observed that if we conceive of the Christian faith—and what it proclaims about human destiny and the goal of all things—apart from reference to the resurrection of Christ, with-

out appreciating its nature as the restoration of all things, then we have not truly grasped the nature of redemption. Since we have been born again to “a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3), the hope of the believer “rests on a promise inseparable from the salvation already granted” in Christ’s resurrection from the dead.³ In God’s mighty act of raising Jesus bodily from the grave we are right to glimpse the final chapter of the drama of redemption. Indeed, an understanding of redemption that fails to take its moorings from Christ’s victory over sin and death via bodily resurrection, and the promise of ultimate restoration of all things declared by the empty tomb, is not a biblical understanding of redemption at all.

Jesus Invaded History

There is an altogether marvelous quality to the concreteness, the this-worldliness, even the earthiness, of the drama of redemption. This history does not transpire within some ethereal and bloodless realm of perfection. Quite the contrary, the events spoken of in Scripture take place within the same world in which you and I live. The redemption of Jesus Christ was not worked out in heaven. It all took place right here, in this world, the same world in which you and I rear our children, pay our bills, and shovel our snow-covered walks. Matthew began his Gospel with a place and date: “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod” (Matt. 2:1). Luke does the same. God was made man in the year that Caesar Augustus was taking a census in connection with a scheme of taxation (Luke 2:1). They tell us that about thirty-three years later Jesus was executed “under Pontius Pilate,” much as we might say, “when the Russian Republic replaced the Soviet Union,” or “when George W. Bush was the president of the United States.” It is as definite and concrete as that. The biblical authors were committed to the historicity of the events they related. They knew that faith without real world, historical fact, is not faith but mere superstition.

3. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 171.

God's Complete Restoration Will Invade History Also

The distinctive thing about the biblical emphasis upon the historicity of these events is the belief that history has a redemptive goal. Biblical religion is oriented toward the future. Israel's hope of the kingdom of God was always an eschatological hope, a hope for the future.⁴ From the Garden forward, Scripture addresses the question of how the Lord will answer human rebellion. The promise that comes to fulfillment in Christ's resurrection is first sounded in the Garden of Eden. The expectation of the coming Redeemer is proclaimed in the mother promise of Genesis 3:15. Anthony Hoekema writes, "From this point on, all the Old Testament revelation looks forward, points forward, and eagerly awaits the promised Redeemer."⁵ The rest of redemptive history is a historical unfolding of that promise.

Because Israel experiences the LORD as a promise-making and promise-keeping God, it can place its hope in his promised kingdom. From an Old Testament perspective, the *eschaton*, the promised future, was seen as beginning with the coming of Messiah and ending with the judgment and the restoration of all things to God. From the foreshortened perspective of the Old Testament the *eschaton* was often understood as a single, comprehensive event or a matrix of events that would transpire in serial and quick succession.

Jesus—A Down Payment on the Coming Restoration

The resurrection is the first event of God's promised resolution to the rebellion of the Garden. Jesus Christ's resurrection is the payment on a promise made when the world was both very young and suddenly made very old by the foolishness and selfishness of sin.

The resurrection is something of a foretaste, a movie trailer or commercial for God's ultimate future, for in Christ's resurrection we

4. The word *eschatological* means "pertaining to the future." It comes from the Greek word *eschatos* ("last"). Eschatology is the study of the biblical witness to the future, either the approximate future as in the warnings of covenant judgment in the Old Testament prophets, or the ultimate future: the return of Christ and the events surrounding his return.

5. Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11.

have a picture of the future given before its arrival. The end is seen ahead of time. As the beginning and foretaste of the future, the resurrection is the firstfruits or the first stage of the coming redemption. The bodily resurrection of Christ not only signifies God's victory over sin and death but also declares the nature of that victory. It is total, comprehensive; so comprehensive that it claims that history is moving toward nothing less than a fully restored and glorified universe. Those who are in Christ, along with the entirety of creation, will receive his resurrection life upon his appearing (Rom. 8:21–25).

This means that Christ is the center of the biblical story. Throughout its length, Scripture has a Christ-centered thrust: he will come! The Bible tells the redemptive story of the promised Messiah who came to redeem. That thrust must define our understanding of the nature of Scripture and the way we read it. As we look back to earlier chapters in the story, we must see that the coming of the Messiah fulfills the covenant promise to Adam that God will crush the power of the evil one (Gen. 3:15). The coming of the Messiah forms the foundation for God's covenant promise to Noah that creation will be sustained for all time (Gen. 8:22). The coming of the Messiah energizes God's covenant promise to Abraham that he and his posterity will be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3). And the coming of the Messiah burns in the covenant promise to the prophets that God will write his law on the hearts of his people and will give them the gift of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:31–34). In the resurrection of Christ God has begun to make good on his promise. The primary difference between the Testaments is that the Old looks toward Christ and the New moves out from him and toward the consummation, a new heavens and new earth, heaven on earth, God dwelling with his people. Thus Scripture is not a series of isolated divine acts but an integrally unified narrative. Because God's plan of salvation is fulfilled in Christ, Jesus is the leading player, the protagonist of the biblical drama of redemption.

All of this strongly suggests that if we want to understand that redemption, we must pay heed to the resurrection. As Christ's saving work is the central theme of the Bible, and his resurrection is the

sign of the fulfillment of that work, so his resurrection is the anticipation of the goal of redemptive history, a peek ahead, if you will, at the last page of the story. Biblically, the best single term to catch the nature of redemption and the character of the Christian hope is resurrection.

The restoration of all things signified and promised in the resurrection is at one and the same time the hope of the believer and the horizon in which he must understand all reality, for it is the direction in which the believer is traveling. Faith means having something to which we can confidently look forward. It means having a goal. The basis for informed Christian action is its vision of the future, and that future can be stated in one word: resurrection.

The usual or popular notion of faith is that it is a trust in something transcendent, anti-creational, otherworldly, anti-scientific, and heavenly. Faith is believing in spite of the facts; and it has nothing to do with anything historical. Faith is believing in what we cannot see. Faith is geared toward spiritual rather than physical things, right?

Well, no. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). The text is not talking about the heavenly, the otherworldly, or something that contradicts this-worldly reality. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is talking about a faith that places its trust in that which comes to us in history. What the church hopes for is the bodily return of the Lord to consummate the kingdom. That is an event in history, albeit a future event. What we do not see is that which we as yet have not experienced. As the chronicle of redeemed sinners (Heb. 11:4–40) makes plain, faith is being sure of God's promise of the future. That promise is anchored in God's absolute faithfulness to the covenant history of his people.

Believing in something spiritual is easy. Very few people actually refuse to believe in a deity of some sort. But believing that God acted in Jesus Christ, raising him from the dead, and that his resurrection is God's absolute promise that he will be victorious over sin and death and will reclaim his fallen creation in the glory of Christ's return, now that's faith.

You and I, by faith, know how the story ends: complete, physical, earthly restoration of all that our sin has broken in God's world. Having glimpsed the future in the resurrection of Jesus, we live our days now in joyful hope.

THE RESURRECTION AS PUBLIC EVENT AND CONFESSION

Thomas's grand confession helps us comprehend the scope of divine redemption, from the first chapter to the last. It also leads us to consider how we come to recognize it and embrace it.

Thomas believed and confessed Jesus as Lord because of the tangible evidence of touch. Yet not all who affirm Jesus' resurrection respond with repentance and faith. We need to see that the resurrection is at once a public event and also one whose significance is grasped only through the work of the Holy Spirit. Thomas believed because he touched, and that is as it should be. But he also believed because the Spirit removed his blindness.

For All to See

Christianity is a religion grounded in history. Unlike religions that seek to transcend history, as if it were a thing to be scorned or ignored, the good news of Jesus Christ is news, the telling of things that have happened. The gospel is the recital of a great event: the mighty act of God in raising Jesus from the dead in fulfillment of his covenant promise.

The fact that the resurrection is a historical, public event anchors the entire gospel. The apostle Paul insists that if Christ is not risen on Easter morning, the entire Christian faith is fallacious and futile. If Christ is dead, the proclamation of the faith is valueless, and all testimony to Christ is false. If God did not raise Jesus, those who place their trust in him perish without hope and no sins are forgiven. Take away his resurrection, and Christians are the most miserable of all people (1 Cor. 15:14–19).

Paul and the other writers of the New Testament do not offer the resurrection as a spiritual truth, a heavenly reality, a secret insight

unavailable to the mass of humanity, or something that requires some special illumination. Paul addresses this directly: The good news of Jesus Christ is not secret, spiritual knowledge, but the declaration of a historical event that is open to all: “By setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). The gospel is nothing less than a telling of the truth, an exposition of the world-transforming, historical fact of the birth, career, death, and resurrection of the Messiah of God. That birth, life, death, and resurrection are fact. They are open and public, as open, public, and factual as gravity or the Korean War. The disciples believed because they saw the risen Christ.

So Why Don’t All See?

The question naturally and rightly arises, Why do not all believe? If the gospel is as historically sure as Hannibal crossing the Alps, why do so few people accept it? Not all who saw Jesus in the flesh accepted him as the Messiah. Not all who hear John’s testimony of the risen Lord are moved to faith.

In this we recognize the blinding effects of sin (2 Cor. 4:4) and the mystery of God’s sovereign election. The gospel is not a secret truth given to some. Rather, the Holy Spirit removes the blindness of the fall. Thus faith is not a *super additum* but the removal of sin’s misperception. By the witness of the Holy Spirit, seeing produces knowing. John links these two verbs with the act of faith throughout John 20 and John 21. Vision, the experience of the risen Christ, must move on to knowledge, commitment to and intimate familiarity with Jesus Christ.

Events are not, of course, self-interpreting. While they are open in the sense that they are moments in history that can be experienced by witness and testimony, their significance is not equally open. Sifting through the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ will not make believers of all. I heard of an atheist who, upon examining the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, accepted the factuality of the event. When asked how he could affirm

the reality of the resurrection without becoming a Christian, he replied, “Strange things happen in history.”

Thus, while we affirm the historicity of Christian faith, we must also recognize that there is no such thing as a brute fact, a self-evident truth, or an event that carries its own self-contained significance. The Gospel of John’s understanding of witness helps us here. Herman Ridderbos has stated that in the witness of the Spirit “facts and their meanings coincide.” The events of biblical history can become redemptive history only through the witness of the Spirit to the believing community as it responds to the biblical story. The recital of the event, then, becomes a proclamation of and a witness to God’s redemptive activity in the world. This activity is open to all; it is a public event, able to be seen by all. But the redemptive significance of that activity is known only through the Spirit of God. The resurrection, like all of God’s acts in history, beginning from his creation of the world, are public events whose significance believers grasp only as the Holy Spirit removes the scales from our eyes.

A Vision That Changes Everything

The resurrection was no private or internal event. Jesus appeared in the flesh to more than five hundred people at once (1 Cor. 15:4–8). But to accept the risen Christ, one must be converted, changed in mind as well as heart. The New Testament word *metanoete*, usually translated as “to repent,” etymologically means “to change one’s mind.” Every new fact we experience calls us to rearrange our mental furniture, perhaps only a small bit, perhaps a great deal. Making room for the new calls for a conversion, a change of the topography of the mind. The gospel calls for a reordering, a conversion that makes the fact that Jesus Christ is not lying dead in a tomb but is alive, the key to understanding all reality. Lesslie Newbigin says:

The simple truth is that the resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point. Some happenings, which come to our notice, may be simply noted without requiring us to undertake any radical revision of our ideas. The story of the resurrection of the crucified is obviously

not of this kind. It may, of course, be dismissed as a fable, as the vast majority of people in our society do. This has nothing to do with the rise of the modern scientific worldview. The fact that a man who has been dead and buried for three days does not arise from a tomb was well known before the invention of electric lights. If it is true, it has to be the starting point of a wholly new way of understanding the cosmos and the human situation in the cosmos.⁶

It is possible that people can refuse to believe John's testimony, functioning as if Jesus' tomb has a No Vacancy sign hanging outside it. It is also possible that we verbally affirm the resurrection and still fail to be changed by it. The Spirit's work is essential. But when he works, as Thomas demonstrates, the resurrection radically transforms our lives. The resurrection, the key to understanding the biblical story, becomes the key to our story as well, the key to a new way of understanding and living in the world.

6. Leslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Event* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11.