

CHRIST'S GLORY,
YOUR GOOD

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Salvation Planned, Promised,
Accomplished, and Applied

Ryan M. McGraw



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Christ's Glory, Your Good
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Preface

Why Does the Glory of Jesus Christ Matter?

In the nineteenth century, Southern Presbyterian minister William S. Plumer (1802–1880) wrote, “For eighteen hundred years a large portion of all the heresies that have arisen have related to the person or work of Christ. Infidelity is most bitter against Christ, while piety feeds upon the truth of which He is the sum.... In no age has malice against Christ been more envenomed than in the present.”¹ This statement is just as applicable—and may be even more so—in the early part of the twenty-first century. There are many versions of Jesus Christ presented in the world, but the only Christ that matters is the one whom God has revealed in Holy Scripture. In the midst of abundant speculation about who Jesus was (or even *if* He was) in popular media, skeptics often discard the Bible as an irrelevant relic. The greatest problem our modern world faces is that it rarely takes the time to examine what God has said about His only begotten Son, who came in human flesh. Far too many people miss the kingdom of heaven because they will not give the King’s message a fair hearing. The purpose of this book is to set forth the gospel in terms of the glory of Jesus Christ and His place in the plan of

1. William S. Plumer, *The Rock of Our Salvation: A Treatise Respecting the Natures, Person, Offices, Work, Sufferings, and Glory of Jesus Christ* (1867; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1995), 9.

God. It is also to show how the gospel of Jesus Christ relates to the message of the entire Bible and all of its central doctrines.

The primary thing that makes this book different from other treatments of the glory of Christ is that it weaves the person and work of Christ together with the major doctrines of Scripture, and it does so in order to drive people to faith in Christ. This book is a popular exercise in what is called systematic theology. Systematic theology summarizes the doctrines of the Bible as a whole and demonstrates how these doctrines progress and relate to one another. The chapters of this book reflect both a logical and a historical order. All doctrine should lead to practice, and all practical holiness worthy of that name must be rooted in sound doctrine. My goal is always to weave systematic theology into the regular expositional preaching of God's Word. I hope that this book reflects this goal in some measure. In particular, the doctrines of the Trinity, historic Reformed covenant theology, Christ as the second Adam, and union with Christ are woven intentionally into every chapter of this book.

More and more I agree with John Owen (1616–1683) that the primary cause of every deficiency in the Christian life is inadequate meditation upon the glory of Jesus Christ. We cannot separate His person and His work. When we believe in Him, we are united to Him. This means that all that He is becomes ours through faith in Him. It means that every aspect of Christianity, from the new birth to the resurrection of the dead, draws its vitality and existence from the person and work of Jesus Christ. Your greatest need in this life is not all that different from the need you had when you first believed in Jesus Christ. You must daily and increasingly behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

If there were no such thing as sin and no divine plan of salvation, Jesus Christ would not exist. The eternal Son of God is God from everlasting, but the title “Jesus Christ” refers to the Son of God who took on human flesh in order to save sinners. He is called Jesus (meaning “Jehovah saves”) because He saves His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name; it is the preeminent title of His office. As the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) states, “Our Mediator was called Christ, because he was anointed with the Holy Ghost above measure; and so set apart, and fully furnished with all authority and ability, to execute the offices of prophet, priest, and king of his church, in the estate both of his humiliation and exaltation” (WLC 42). He is not *a* Christ; He is *the* Christ because He is the only mediator between God and sinful humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). The eternal Son of God is Jesus the Christ because He took human flesh upon Himself in order to save His people from their sins.

In these pages, salvation is at your fingertips. This subject matter contains joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8). What is more worthy of your time than to consider what the Bible says about the most important figure in human history?



To Mom

With gratitude for everything



Acknowledgments

Many thanks are due to my wife, Krista. She has heard just about everything that I have ever thought and written about many times over. We have rejoiced together over the doctrines in this book, and our bond of marriage is the most joyful of earthly relationships because of our common bond with the triune God.

I am grateful to Grace Presbyterian Church to whom I formerly ministered in Conway (near Myrtle Beach), South Carolina. Without the prayers of this beloved flock, both my preaching and my writing would in large measure be without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks are due as well to Ian Hamilton for reading the manuscript and for making useful comments. My mother-in-law, Sylvia Stevens, has provided indispensable help in adding clarity to my writing, and I cannot thank her adequately. I am grateful to the editorial team at Reformation Heritage Books and to Annette Gysen in particular for her thorough and invaluable feedback as well as for her patience and understanding with the author's idiosyncrasies.

The idea for this book originated in a seminary class on evangelism under Dr. Tony Curto. He challenged his students to write a gospel "tract" (with no page limitations) that included everything that was necessary to explain the gospel adequately. In some ways, this book is my attempt at doing so.

Last, I bless the Father for giving His Son to be such a glorious Redeemer. I praise both the Father and the Son for sending the Holy Spirit to equip the church for its work. And I bless the Holy Spirit for bringing me, with all of God's people, to the Father through the Son.

CHAPTER 1



The Eternal Christ

In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.

—TITUS 1:2

Some biblical truths are not revealed explicitly in any single passage of Scripture. While we learn some doctrines by discerning what lies virtually on the surface of the text of the Bible, we learn others by looking at the “big picture” presented by the book as a whole. To borrow an analogy from Jeremiah Burroughs (1600–1646), when we stand too close to a great work of art, we cannot adequately appreciate the beauty of the painting. It is only when we stand back and view the painting as a whole that it appears to be a brilliant piece of artwork.¹ This is true with respect to the eternal plan of redemption of the triune God. The unfolding plan of redemption in the Bible is like a flower gradually coming to bloom in spring. Genesis begins with a promise of global redemption from sin in the bud (Gen. 3:15), the books of the Old Testament unfold this plan gradually in stages, and then the New Testament sets forth this same gospel in its full

1. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, ed. Don Kistler (1648; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 19.

bloom and unveiled glory. However, when we step back and view the plan of redemption that is set forth in the entire Bible, we must realize at once that this plan carefully follows a divine and eternal blueprint. Redemption is planned, promised, accomplished, and applied to sinners according to this eternal blueprint.

In order to understand the glory of God's plan of redemption, we must begin with the glory of the eternal Son of God and His place in the plan of the triune God. Most people who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ have neither understood nor seen any glory in God's plan to save sinners. This is due to two simultaneous issues: The "god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:4); and they do not take the time to listen to what the Bible actually says about God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, even genuine believers have not often appreciated the full glory of the gospel and its scope, purpose, and divine magnificence because they have neglected its eternal roots. For these reasons, this chapter will describe how the glory of the eternal Son of God and His place in the eternal plan of God are the foundation of the gospel. I will demonstrate this by showing that God's plan of redemption is an eternal plan, a covenantal plan, a Trinitarian plan, and a plan that determines history. The nature of this topic demands that instead of relying upon one specific passage of Scripture alone, we must draw upon several texts in order to paint the big picture of God's eternal plan of redemption.

An Eternal Plan

Many passages of Scripture indicate that the triune God planned redemption from all eternity. Titus 1:2 states, “God, that cannot lie, promised [eternal life] before the world began.” “Before the world began,” time did not yet exist. God is eternal, and He has no beginning nor end nor length of days. He is eternal, and the phrase “before the world began” refers to something that He did “before” the world eternally.² The question is, if God promised eternal life in eternity past, then to whom did He make this promise? The doctrine of the Trinity alone can supply the answer to this question. There is one God only (1 Cor. 8:5–6; Isa. 42:8). God alone existed “before the world began.” The biblical assertion that this one God exists in three persons is the only means by which we can speak intelligently of God promising eternal life “before the world began.” God could have made this promise only to an eternal person. Yet if this person were not Himself God, then He could not be eternal. The doctrine woven into the fabric of the New Testament that God is one in essence or being and three in persons makes perfect sense of this promise.³ Paul teaches in Titus 1:2 that in eternity, one person in the Godhead made a promise of eternal life to another person in the Godhead.

2. On the decree as an eternal act of God, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:372–73.

3. Robert Letham makes the point that the apostles assumed the Trinity as the backdrop of all that they wrote. See Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004), 63, 69–71.

In verse 3, Paul adds that the glory of New Testament preaching consists in proclaiming this eternal plan and promise of God. Does this not add both weight and glory to the preaching of the gospel? When the gospel is preached, we do not simply consider wondrous historical events that occurred in Palestine many centuries ago, but we look, as it were, through a window into the eternal counsel of God Himself! The secret things belong to the Lord our God alone (Deut. 29:29), but when we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, God is unfolding to us His secret and eternal counsel. Should we not bow in amazement every time we hear the gospel? Moreover, Paul's words imply that this plan and promise of redemption are absolutely certain. The promise is eternal; therefore, it is everlasting. It is God who made the promise, and it is impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6:18). If this promise of eternal life is itself eternal, and it was made by one who cannot lie, then it is unchangeable as well. What greater grounds could you have for assurance in the security of God's plan of redemption? Even before we delve more deeply into the content of the gospel, you must remember that every time you hear the gospel, you are getting a glimpse of that which was in the heart of the triune God before time began! This teaching is not isolated to Titus 1:2, but it is also found in Proverbs 8:22–31 (with John 17:5), Psalm 2, Romans 16:25–26, Revelation 13:8, and many other passages.⁴ The apostle Paul's favorite way of describing

4. In Psalm 2:6, the Father establishes His Son upon His throne. In verse 7, the Son declares the purpose that the Father decreed. In verses 8 and 9, the Father calls the Son to ask Him to give the nations as His promised inheritance. The psalm reflects a predetermined plan between the Father and the Son regarding the fate of the nations. The

the eternal election of believers is that the Father chose them in Christ before time began (for example, Ephesians 1:4).

A Covenantal Plan

If the eternal promise of eternal life was given from one person of the Godhead to another, then several questions arise: What does this promise imply? Which persons in the Godhead are involved? Are all three persons involved? And, if the promise of eternal life was given to one of the persons of the Trinity, then how can it be offered to me? I will answer these questions in the next two sections below.

This arrangement within the eternal Trinity resembles what the Scriptures refer to as a covenant. A covenant is defined in the children's catechism as "an agreement between two or more persons." Covenants have been called contracts between two or more parties, and they contain promises, threats, rewards, punishments, and stipulations or terms that govern the entire relationship. Some have argued that a promise is the primary element of a covenant.⁵ Others have asserted that a covenant between God and man is a bond in blood that is sovereignly administered.⁶ For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that a covenant is an agreement between two or more persons that revolves around promises and conditions that bind both parties, and that includes sanctions for breaking the covenant and promises upon fulfilling it. A

New Testament passages cited above make it clear that this was an eternal promise.

5. John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1988), 5–12.

6. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1980), 3–15.

covenant arrangement does not necessarily imply that both parties are equal. In the case of God and man, the parties are not equal. In the case of human beings, however, the parties may be equal. In the case of divine persons, the parties are always equal as well. There are no divisions in the Godhead, and no bartering or debating occurs in the counsel of the triune God. All three persons agree perfectly and immutably. The promise of eternal life in Titus 1:2 points to a covenant within the Godhead that shows the place of the Son of God in our redemption. It reflects an eternal agreement between two or more persons of the Trinity that includes promises and conditions.

In the New Testament, it is the Son of God rather than the Father or the Holy Spirit who accomplished the redemption of His people. There is one God and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). The Son of God is Himself the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20). This last phrase, combined with Titus 1:2, indicates the Son received the promise of eternal life in eternity past and that the Son is Himself eternal life. This is why the Son has the ability to give eternal life to those whom He wills (John 5:26). It is reasonable to assume that what is in view in Titus 1:2 is an eternal and unchangeable covenant promise from the Father to the Son consisting in eternal life for His people. Perhaps this is why the apostle Paul customarily greeted the churches with grace and peace “from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Titus 1:4). Since the middle of the seventeenth century, this eternal arrangement between the Father and the Son typically has been called the covenant of redemption.

A Trinitarian Plan

Where is the Holy Spirit in this arrangement? Is He excluded? Some have argued against an eternal covenant within the Godhead because they think that it emphasizes two persons of the Trinity at the expense of the third.⁷ We must remember, however, the ancient teaching that the works of the Godhead are always undivided. This means that no divine person ever acts independently. Denying the distinct operations of each person in the Godhead would deny the reality of the three persons, but denying that all three persons act simultaneously in every work of God would deny the deity of at least one if not all three persons. When God acts, all three persons in the Godhead must act. The Father who “so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16); the Son (not the Father or the Spirit) became incarnate in the womb of the virgin Mary (Gal. 4:4); and the Spirit overshadowed her womb so that the “holy thing” in her would be born of God (Luke 1:35). Therefore, even though the covenant of redemption explicitly includes the Father and the Son, we cannot assume that the Holy Spirit is excluded from it.⁸

The Puritan John Owen is very helpful on this point. He taught that in the eternal covenant of redemption, the Father promised eternal life to the Son as the surety for His elect, the Son promised to become incarnate and to

7. Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 401.

8. Thomas Goodwin provides a very helpful treatment of the role of the Holy Spirit in the covenant of redemption. For a summary and analysis of Goodwin’s views, see Mark Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of the Puritan Reformed Orthodox Theologian, Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680)* (Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010), 123–45.

accomplish everything necessary to redeem His people, and the Holy Spirit voluntarily agreed to be sent from the Father and the Son in order to ensure that all of the Father's elect people should be saved.⁹ He is not a party in the covenant of redemption because He was not humiliated like the Son, but He is actively involved in the covenant of redemption.¹⁰ The place of the Holy Spirit in the covenant of redemption reflects His eternal relationship to the Father and the Son. He proceeds from the Father through the Son in his work in human history (John 15:26) because He proceeds from the Father through the Son eternally. Every action of God toward us is from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit. Every time a person approaches God he does so by the Spirit, through the Son, and to the Father (see Eph. 2:18). God is never obligated to save you or anyone else in the world. When the Father promised eternal life, His promise was voluntary. When the Son agreed to become the mediator (or middle person) between God and man, this agreement was voluntary. When the Spirit agreed to come in time from the Father and the Son, He was under no other obligation to secure the redemption of the elect than the voluntary agreement of His divine and sovereign will with the Father and the Son. One divine person cannot act without the other two

9. John Owen, "The Strength of Faith," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 9:36.

10. The most helpful treatment that I have read on the role of the Spirit in the covenant of redemption is Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), "Economy of the Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 20:430–43. This resource is available at Edwards.yale.edu.

without ceasing to be God. Are you not humbled that the triune God should freely choose to save anyone? If the thought of God's eternal and sovereign freedom in the covenant of redemption does not humble you and cause you to bow your knee in worship before Him, then what else possibly will?

A Plan That Determines History

Titus 1:2 hints at God's eternal plan, which He reveals in history through preaching (v. 3). This plan is not only revealed in history, but it has also shaped and determined the entire course of history. From Genesis 3:15 onward (see chapter 2), the Lord began to reveal to us how this plan of redemption would be accomplished in time. However, in the New Testament, through passages such as the one we are considering, the Lord drives us back to the eternal roots of His plan. When we consider how the covenant of redemption determines God's work in human history, we can begin to answer the last question I posed: "If the promise of eternal life was given to one of the persons of the Trinity, then how can it be offered to me?" The answer is that Jesus Christ received the promise of eternal life in the covenant of redemption so that we might receive it in union with Him through the covenant of grace.

The covenant of grace ordinarily refers to God's covenant made in human history with the elect by virtue of the person and work of Jesus Christ. How does this relate to the eternal covenant of redemption? Some, such as Samuel Petto (1624–1711) and Thomas Boston (1676–1732), have said that the covenant of grace includes the covenant of redemption. In other words, there are not really two distinct covenants, with one being made in eternity between the Father and the Son and the other being made in time with those who receive

and rest upon Christ alone as He is offered to them in the gospel. This means that the covenant of grace is made with Christ in eternity and only with Christians indirectly as they trust in Jesus Christ. There is a lot to be said in favor of this position. On the surface, it appears to reflect the teaching of Westminster Larger Catechism 31.¹¹ However, Owen is once again a helpful guide. He argued that while the covenant of redemption is the pattern for the covenant of grace, we must distinguish between the two. The primary reason is that not everything that was promised to Christ was promised to the elect.¹² The Father promised Christ that if He fulfilled the terms of the broken covenant of works made with Adam, then His obedience as well as His sacrifice would be accepted in the place of His elect people. The Father also promised to give those who are redeemed as a gift to His Son. Who would ever say that the Father promises these things to the elect? We are saved because we are delivered from the terms of the covenant of works through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our surety. Therefore, it is better to distinguish the covenant of redemption from the covenant of grace. We are not simply considering an eternal aspect versus a historical aspect of the

11. "The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed." In reality, the Westminster divines most likely believed that both the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace were made first and foremost with Christ, who represented His people. Even though they are two distinct covenants, Christ is the element that ties them inseparably together.

12. John Owen, *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 12:497–507.

same covenant; we are talking about an eternal covenant that is the foundation and the pattern of a historical covenant.

This means that everything that God has ever done in human history has taken place according to His eternal plan. When we make plans, we must say, "If the Lord will, we shall live" (James 4:15). When the triune God makes a plan, He who sits above the circle of the earth does all that He pleases (Ps. 115:3; 135:6). He works all things according to the counsel of His holy will (Eph. 1:11), and His eternal plan of redemption in Christ is the centerpiece of that plan around which all other things revolve. The reason Christ could receive the promise of eternal life before the world began and then offer eternal life to you in time is because the Father promised that the Son would merit eternal life by His life, obedience, death, and resurrection. The eternal Son brought this eternal promise to fruition by fulfilling God's plan in human history. In the covenant of grace, He calls you to enter into a saving union with Him through faith. To be in union with Christ means to receive all that Christ has merited and received by fulfilling the covenant of redemption. When you hear the gospel offered to you in preaching, the eternal Son promises to enter into covenant with you personally. This is not only where the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace meet, but also this is where the Holy Spirit comes into prominence. The covenant of redemption is like the statement of intent to marry at the beginning of a wedding ceremony. The covenant of grace is like the actual vows taken in order to constitute the marriage relationship. In this case, it is the Holy Spirit, as promised in the terms of the covenant, who unites you to Jesus Christ in order to receive all of the benefits of redemption.

In summary, the covenant of redemption places the highest emphasis upon the electing love of the Father. The covenant of grace highlights more fully the redemption purchased by Christ and the personal work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers.¹³ In the covenant of redemption we must see the glory of the eternal Son of God as our eternal Redeemer!

Conclusions

We must draw several conclusions from the eternal covenant of redemption. First, if God promised eternal life in Christ before the world began, then God looked upon those whom He would redeem as sinful and as needing redemption. There is no such thing as redemption without sin, and there is no covenant of redemption without eternally elect sinners to save. In order to lay hold of Christ and the covenant, you must be convicted of your guilt before God.

Second, if God made the covenant of redemption in order to save the elect, then Christ came to die on behalf of the elect only. The Father did not send Christ to die for the elect only for the Son to disagree with the Father and die for all men. The Son lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:15). Moreover, the Spirit changes only the hearts of those whom the Father elected. Saying that Christ died for all men equally divides the holy Trinity. You know that Christ died for you only when you, by the Spirit, come to the Father through the Son.

13. This relationship is like the relationship between the eternal decrees of God and the providence of God. The decree determines what shall come to pass, and providence marks the execution of the decree in time.

Third, the Trinity is not a speculative doctrine that is part of a list of “essential doctrines” and then set on a shelf for future reference if needed. We cannot understand the glory of Christ or the glory of the gospel without a God who is triune. If there is no Trinity, then there is no gospel and no Christianity.

Fourth, if the triune God planned from eternity to save elect sinners, then His plan of redemption is sovereign, voluntary, and gracious. The Lord is not obligated to save sinners. If Adam and Eve had never fallen in the garden of Eden, then God would have been perfectly just if He decided one day to fold up the world, causing it and its inhabitants to cease to exist. God’s eternal and covenantal plan in and through His Son ought to magnify the grace of God in our hearts. If you believe in Christ, then you may be assured that God had you in mind in His eternal covenant of redemption! If you have not believed in Christ, then why should you expect any good thing from God? Who are you to demand anything from God? Who are you to ignore God’s call to you in the gospel when He has unfolded His eternal plan before you? Will you not marvel at God’s eternal plan and promise, and will you not embrace Jesus Christ by faith so that you too may see your name in the Lamb’s Book of Life written before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8)? As we look at our names in that book through faith in Jesus Christ, let us stand in awe of God’s eternal and glorious plan through His eternal and glorious Son!