

Xmas II

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[0:00] Good morning. Happy New Year.

Moses once prayed in Psalm 90, Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. And as you look back upon the year, now ended, we may say with faith, even when it is difficult to do so at times, that the Lord has indeed been our dwelling place. He has been present in the joys and the sorrows. He's been present in the trials and temptations, in the successes and in the failures, in the ups and downs.

Perhaps most memorably, in the downs, he's been present. He has been our dwelling place. And now, as time turns and we stand at the beginning of a new year, the year of our Lord, 2026, the church teaches us to pray again with Moses in Psalm 90, verse 12.

It is deeply instructive, I think, that on January 1st, what the world calls New Year's Day, the historic Christian church directs our attention, not primarily to time, or the beginning of a new year, the marking of another year, not to resolutions, not even to the year itself.

But the church directs our gaze to the Lord of time, and particularly to the circumcision of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[2:07] The octave of our Lord, which just means the eighth day after his birth, is naming and his circumcision being the eighth day, which also falls every year on the first day of the year.

This day is profoundly theological, has profoundly theological significance. And we're meant to see that as we keep the church here.

As we mark the rhythm of our days and times, not only by the secular calendar, but by the church here. The year begins, for us, who belong to Jesus, with a reminder of Christ dwelling among us bodily, so he can redeem our time and days in himself.

And as we understand that the right beginning of a new year is not mere self-improvement, but it is obedience grounded in grace.

It's the obedience of Christ for us, which we remember, particularly observing his circumcision. We remember that the obedience of Christ was for us and for our salvation.

[3:26] And then the obedience of Christ is being formed in us as well. So we turn our gaze then to the epistle reading this morning from Romans 4, verse 8 to 14, as we think about what Paul has to say about Christian circumcision.

St. Paul's epistle presses us beyond outward religion and forces us to ask how a sinner is truly blessed before God.

Paul begins with David's words from Psalm 32. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not impute sin. That's quite a blessing.

Just think about it again. What Paul says here as he quotes David, Blessed is the man or woman against whom the Lord will not impute sin.

What a great blessing. Can you buy such a blessing? If you have the wealth of the world, can it afford you such a blessing?

[4:51] But immediately Paul continues, Is this blessedness only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised?

And this is not just an abstract question from Paul, but it's a practical one that has salvific, saving significance. Does blessedness, the one that he speaks of here, belong only to those marked by the covenant boundary sign of circumcision?

Or does it belong to all who believe? That is, is it confined to Israel alone? Or does it extend to the Gentiles?

To the world? That's a good question to be asking. As we're about to embark on the epiphany tide. And to answer this, Paul takes us back to Abraham.

Paul answers, ages on chronology. That is, in fact, Abraham's chronology. Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness, we're told.

[6:07] That's from Genesis 15 verse 6. Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness. Genesis 15 verse 6.

That is before he received circumcision, which we read just this morning in Genesis 17. Thus, righteousness cannot depend on circumcision.

That's not what it depends on. Since Abraham already possessed righteousness, apart from the sign of circumcision. Abraham's circumcision did not mark his entrance into God's favor.

That favor had already been given long before, when Abraham believed God's promise, while he was still uncircumcised.

Faith was counted to him as righteousness. And Paul goes on to dismantle any attempt to confuse the means with the markers.

[7:10] Circumcision, therefore, was not the cause of grace to Abraham. But what was it?

It was the seal of grace already received. He had already received righteousness, given to him as a gift from God, imputed to him.

The circumcision was merely the seal of what he already has. Abraham did not obtain righteousness because he was circumcised. He was circumcised because he had already been declared righteous by faith.

Circumcision does not bestow righteousness. It witnesses to it. This makes Abraham's circumcision fundamentally different from that of those who came after him.

Because he was already declared righteous before his circumcision. Circumcision only marked entrance into the covenant.

[8:12] Rather, he was already in the covenant before the circumcision. Whereas for everyone else who came after him, the circumcision marked the entrance into the covenant. So Abraham's position is unique in this regard.

And precisely, I think it's precisely for this reason, that Paul presents him to us as the model for Christians. Like Abraham, we stand before God not on the basis of ritual or law-keeping.

Why do we, and how do we stand before God? We stand before God on the basis of faith in God's promise. The promise, Paul insists, did not come through the law.

You will say this if you read on in Romans 4 and 5. How did it come? The promise came through the righteousness of faith.

If inheritance depended upon observing the law, faith will be emptied of meaning. And the promise itself will be meaningless.

[9:22] For rather, faith, not law, was the means of our inheritance.

As he goes on to say in verse 13 and 14, For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he will be heir of the world did not come through the law, but it came through the righteousness of faith.

For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null. And the promise is void. Paul expands the argument from the circumcision to the law as a whole.

The promise that Abraham will be heir of the world did not come through his law keeping, not through obedience to the law. It came through the righteousness of faith.

I think Paul is here saying, I think Paul here exposes the contradiction of legalism, of legal ritual keeping, just mere law keeping.

[10:27] He exposes the contradiction of that sort of discipleship and faith, or religiosity rather, with a true confidence in the promises of God.

Paul says that if you are to settle and put confidence in just mere law keeping, if inheritance, if your inheritance in your place and identification with God is just based on law keeping, then your faith is emptied of meaning.

That's a heavy thing to say. And then he says, further, the promise, the promise of God collapses if you're just in, just by law keeping.

Law and promise operate on different principles. Law demands, promise gives. Law judges, promise justifies.

The law can identify hairs only apathetically. Oh yeah, you're a child of Abraham, you're a seed of Abraham, you're circumcised. But faith does more than that.

[11:48] Faith actually takes hold of those who are recipients of that promise. Those who have actually received what God freely gives. Faith is the instrument by which we apprehend and take

hold of God's promise.

Thus, justification by faith alone is not Paul's invention, but it is the original DNA of the Abrahamic covenant as God gives it to which we are inheritors through Jesus Christ, who is the promised and true seed of Abraham himself.

God. And so, I think this brings us naturally, as we think of circumcision, we think of Abraham's circumcision, and we think of our spiritual circumcision, it brings us naturally to the circumcision of Christ in our gospel reading this morning.

The gospel reading consisted of a single verse that records the circumcision itself in verse 21 of Luke chapter 2. And the surrounding verses complete the Christmas narrative, which we're familiar with, and it teaches us to make the right use of the Christmas truth in our daily lives.

Just let's think about the gospel reading. If we would receive true circumcision of the Spirit, we're invited to first imitate three examples set before us in this gospel reading.

[13:26] the first is the example of the shepherds. There's an ironic symbolism in the fact that they are shepherds who first were recipients of the good news that God has come to dwell with us.

By the time of our Lord's birth, the shepherds had come to be associated with a state of perpetual ritual uncleanness. They were not respected people.

To be a shepherd is not what a child grows up wishing to be by the time of Jesus' day. They were often held with social suspicion and mockery.

And I think in fact in some ways this is a sign that Israel, this is a sign, the very fact that they held shepherds this way is a sign that Israel spiritually has deteriorated.

shepherd. That is a sign that Israel as a nation has deserted Yahweh and given himself over to empty ritualistic religion and mere law keeping.

[14:35] They have emptied their spiritual, religious practices of God's glory and presence. Why? Why do I say that? Because the shepherd, Israel's greatest king, the one through whom the Messiah will come.

He himself was a shepherd. I'm speaking of David here. The Old Testament often compares God, God himself to a shepherd who tends Israel, his flock.

And the promised Messiah was prophesied to be Israel's true shepherd. In Ezekiel 34 and in Zechariah 9 and Zechariah 10, there's this promise from the prophets that the promised coming Messiah will be Israel's true shepherd.

And Jesus himself in John 10 identifies himself as the good shepherd. And so for you to, if you realize that this shepherd has this meaning and significance, it's a shame that shepherds in the time of Jesus were so demeaned and had no respect.

But not so with God. Luke presents the shepherds as the first human beneficiaries of the gospel announcement. The angels of Christmas have gone away into heaven after they appear to the shepherds.

[16:08] But the newborn Savior to whom they came to proclaim remains. He remained in a stable and a feeding trough for animals.

And so the shepherds heeding the message of the angels said to themselves, let us go even unto Bethlehem.

Their response, their faithful response to the angels message unfolds in three ways. First faith and then witness and then worship.

Faith in saying let us go and see this thing which the Lord has made known. And then in witness were told by Luke that they made known the same that had been told them.

They didn't keep it secret. They didn't keep it to themselves. They made it known. And then worship. they returned glorifying and praising God.

[17:18] Luke shows that proximity to God is not achieved by just ritual status or by cleanliness. These people were thought unclean. unclean.

But Luke wants to show us that proximity to God is by divine invitation. You cannot come near God just on the basis of your own righteousness or your own law keeping.

God invites and draws us to himself.

And he draws it by giving us faith. The gift of faith. As we respond to him. And as we draw near to him.

In faith filled response. This is what happened with the shepherds. The shepherds made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the

shepherds told them.

[18 : 23] Luke tells us. Though they were ritually unclean and socially insignificant, they became the first messengers of the saving name of Jesus.

Even plain shepherds may echo angels, as one commentator puts it, and do angels' work. Even plain shepherds may echo angels' songs and do angels' work.

The shepherds embody the very principle Paul wants to communicate to us in Romans. That blessedness precedes boundary markers.

And then we have secondly, first example of the shepherds. Secondly, in this reading, we have the example of Mary. Mary treasured up, in verse 19, Luke tells us, Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in our heart.

Mary keeps silence, but it isn't a silence of fear, or apathy, or neglect, but it is a silence full of faith.

[19 : 42] Mary's response differs, but complements the shepherd's response. She treasures and ponders upon these events that she is eyewitness to.

Luke portrays her as the model believer who receives God's acts, not through complete comprehension, but trustful devotion and reflection.

Her faith is like that of Abraham's, actually, who also believed the promise before understanding its full shape. And so we are called to follow Mary's example.

As Mary pondered the mystery of her motherhood of Christ, we are also called to ponder the mystery of our brotherhood of Christ.

He has united our nature to his own being by being Mary's child. And in his identification with us, human nature itself is dignified beyond measure.

[20 : 56] Christ has become one with us so that he might redeem and ransom us from our lowly estate. Mary also teaches us patience.

As one commentator puts it, the mystery of grace is now revealed. The mystery of grace now revealed will one day issue in the mystery of glory proportion to it.

Imagine all that Mary saw, all that she witnessed. Christ. When Luke says she pondered these things in her heart. Oftentimes, actually Luke says that a lot in the beginning of his gospel regarding Mary.

She pondered in her heart when the angel Gabriel came to her, telling her that she will bear a son, that he will be the son of God, he will be the promised Messiah. And she says, I have been with no man.

and the angel says to her, you are unique among women. She pondered that in her heart. She pondered at the birth of her son, as the shepherds came to worship this baby as king, and as strangers, as we will see at Epiphany, strangers from distant lands came to worship this child.

[22 : 21] She pondered in her heart. She pondered in her heart as she went to the temple to circumcise her son, at her showing, and 40 days after her birth to do sacrifice.

She pondered as Anna, faithful Anna, the prophetess, and faithful Simeon came to her. She had nothing, she was not dressed like a queen.

She had nothing to display or make her stand out. She was a poor Jewish woman in the temple. Yet these two faithful ones come to her and prophesy about the child that she carries in her arms.

She ponders it all in her heart. And that pondering is not anxious doubt, but it is faithful commitment and holding on to God's promise.

Just like Abraham held on to God's promise. When God says, leave your land, go, I will make you a father of many nations. He also faithfully held on to God's promise, even though he didn't fully and cannot, could not fully comprehend the full scope of what God was saying to him.

[23 : 35] And Mary teaches us to patiently, patiently hold to God's promise, knowing that as the mystery of grace is revealed, one day the mystery of glory will be made proportion to it.

And lastly, we have, we've had the example of the shepherds, we have the example of Mary, now lastly, we have the example of our Savior himself. Verse 21, and at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Luke concludes this account with this detail of the Lord's naming and circumcision. At the end of eight days, which is customary, Jesus, as a true Jew, was circumcised.

And he was given the name Jesus, the name that was promised even before his conception. The eternal Son of God submits himself to the covenant sign, not for his sake, because he is righteous

and without sin, he does so for our sake.

Christ is born under the law, Paul tells us this in Galatians. Christ became obedient to the law where we could not.

[25 : 10] Christ is marked by the sign that signifies his judgment and promise. His circumcision is not merely about inclusion into Israel, but his circumcision is about active obedience.

The kind of active obedience that fulfills the law. Where the law condemns you and me as sinners, Christ the sinless one, the righteous son, fulfills all the demands of the law.

His name of Jesus means the Lord saves. Yahweh saves. Jehoshua.

And at his circumcision, his circumcision ties to his mission which explicitly speaks of his obedience. it tells us that salvation for us will not come by Jesus abolishing the law, but it will come by Jesus fulfilling the law.

And we will be justified before God on the basis of Jesus' perfect keeping of that law. Christ came to render for us the perfect obedience which God demands.

[26 : 36] he obeyed the very letter of the law so that we might learn to obey the spirit of the law. We cannot obey every letter of the law.

We are corrupted by sin. But his obedience is not only exemplary. In fact, his obedience is not, it is exemplary we're meant to be like Christ and to be formed into his image.

But more than exemplary, Christ's obedience is substitutionary. What do I mean by that? It means that his obedience is counted into your account and my account.

His righteousness is counted to us by faith. As Christ obeyed out of love, so we are called then to obey from the same motive.

God's law is not meant to be a burden. It's meant to be a blessing. And why can it be a blessing?

Because the law is a burden, brothers and sisters.

[27 : 43] If we think we can keep it, it becomes a burden. But because Christ has kept it perfectly, and his perfect law of keeping has been counted and put into our account, the law now becomes a blessing to us.

when our wills are conformed to his will, when his will, that is God's will, becomes our delight out of gratitude and love for the one who has come to save us.

When we truly receive the circumcision of the spirit, the law becomes a blessing. Because we know that in Christ we're justified, we're counted righteous, and the perfect obedience of another.

And so in conclusion, brothers and sisters, another year is upon us. What we will do with this new year? While the world begins with resolutions, the kind of resolutions that is rooted in self-confidence, and often always ends in disappointment, I'm not saying don't make resolutions now, but make it with soberness, and perhaps make the right resolutions.

But unlike the world, we're meant to begin our contemplation of the new year with Christ. We're meant to begin our contemplation with Christ's obedience.

[29 : 11] We're meant to begin our contemplation of the new year with Christ's blood, and we're meant to begin the contemplation of the new year with his name in our minds and in our lips. Jesus, the Lord saves.

let us make up our minds then, not to trust in ourselves, but to know Christ, not to rely on our discipline alone, but to rely on his righteousness, and having been counted among the blessed by faith, let us commit ourselves to pray daily, that our Father will grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit, so we may in all things obey God's blessed will.

For the sake of him who obeyed for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Let us pray. Almighty God, who makes our blessed son to be circumcised and obedient to the law for man, grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit, that our hearts and all our members, be mortified from our worldly and carnal loss, may in all things obey that blessed will, through the same thy son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.