

THE FORGOTTEN BACKDROP

SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2026 • 18:00 • CITYHILL CHURCH

A backdrop to a stage/film set: gives context; indicates mood; provides contrast; adds detail (not in lines). It adds to the meaning and impact of the play in a similar way to the set, lighting, sound, costume and props.

A good backdrop does not intrude on or detract from the play, but it's in the background all the time (the story is played out against it) and it helps to convey the full and correct meaning of what is going on.

The best backdrops provide a contrast to what's on stage (they make the players and play stand out) rather than being just like it (so that both play and background lose distinctiveness and interest).

Most importantly, you don't focus on a backdrop (except briefly at the start of a scene/story, and perhaps on a few occasions momentarily thereafter) but on the actors and what they are saying/doing.

The NT could be likened to a play performed on a stage. Its plot unfolds through the actions of the players and its themes are announced and developed through their speeches. Together they record the new revelation – the new stage of salvation history – being made known and available by God to man in this new covenant or testament. Although other elements of the production enhance the play's power and meaning, the main message is contained in who the players are and what they do and say. Quite rightly, that's what we, the spectators, focus on.

But the NT story is played out against a backdrop. While the backdrop is not the focus, it nevertheless plays a critical part in helping us to understand correctly and fully the message being conveyed by the actors and their lines. We forget, downplay, ignore or remove the backdrop at our peril.

So what is the main message of the NT 'play' – what do actors, actions and speeches combine to tell us? And what is the backdrop?

The angel's words to the shepherds in the very first scene summarize both the main message ("I bring you *good news of great joy* that will be *for all the people*") and the reason for it ("Today in the town of David *a Saviour has been born to you*; he is Christ the Lord"). Everything about the opening of the NT indicates the announcement of a new chapter in the story of God and man: the angels' words to first Zechariah and then Mary, and their songs of response (Lk 1); the angel's message to the shepherds already quoted (Lk 2/10f); the confirmation immediately afterwards that this birth heralds a new disposition in God towards mankind ("Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests" v14); how Jesus chose to introduce himself, selectively quoting from Isaiah at the start of his ministry and so highlighting the new dispensation of divine favour ("The Spirit of the Lord is on me...to preach good news...He has sent me to proclaim freedom...sight...release...the year of the Lord's favour...Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing": 4/18f,21); and John's great introduction to the Incarnation ("For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ": Jn 1/17). And it is this new time of favour that Paul had in mind when he later wrote (quoting Is 49/8): "For he says, 'In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation." (2 Co 6/2) Why? Because "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." And so "we implore you: be reconciled to God...we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain." (5/19f,6/1)

At the centre of the NT story and revelation, then, is the gospel, the good news that God's Saviour, and with him God's salvation, have come. This salvation is *for all men*: not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles; not just for the great and the 'good' but for the lowly and the sinner. This salvation is *from all oppression*: from rulers and empires; from sickness, poverty, strife and every earthly ill; from sin and all its consequences – guilt, death,

judgement and hell. This salvation is *for all time*: not just for another period of time (another covenant or dispensation) but for all time – and, indeed, eternity: there will/can be no improvement on this.

Consequently, the emphasis in the NT, both in its appeal to the unsaved and in its instruction of the saved, is on those attributes of God* that come to the fore in his saving intervention through Christ: e.g. the 3 ‘gospel in a nutshell’ passages highlight God’s grace (Ro 3/21-31), his love, mercy, grace (3x) and kindness (Ep 2/1-10) and his kindness, love, mercy and grace (Tt 3/3-8). vs other attributes

For similar reasons, the love, grace and goodness of God (respectively, the why, how and for what God has saved us) become effectively and in his experience the ‘whole’ truth about God for the Christian*. And the church quite naturally focusses on these attributes in its teaching, fellowship, worship & prayer. vs for others

And once more for similar reasons, assured of salvation and eternal life, the NT and the Christian’s forward look is exclusively to heaven. vs hell

The NT ‘play’, then, is about the good news of God’s new time of favour to men: he has sent his Saviour and his salvation into the world. The main themes are the love, grace and goodness of God thereby shown to us and how we can respond to and live in those – experiencing abundant life now as we look forward to and prepare for eternal life in heaven. It is natural and right that we focus on this main message as we watch the play and tell others about it.

But there is a backdrop to the action being played out on stage. If we forget, downplay, ignore or remove it, at best the story will be less meaningful and joyful than it should be (it may even be confusing or offensive); at worst, we will misunderstand what the story is telling us and misrepresent the main characters and themes in our own watching of the play or in our telling others about it.

The backdrop to the NT message (the gospel, salvation, t Christian life) is established in the OT but remains ever-present in the NT behind (it is the reason for) the action taking place and the themes being developed on stage. The backdrop is the overarching truth of God (*everything* that he is), man (what he is), and the consequences. Here is a selection of texts from the New Testament, and from every one of its nine authors:

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. MW 25/41,46

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. MW 10/28

It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, where the fire never goes out. MK 9/43

Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved but whoever does not believe will be condemned. 16/16

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?...The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. LK 3/7,9

Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves thrown out. LK 13/24-28

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son...Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him. JN 3/18,36

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them. RO 1/18,32

Now we know that God’s judgement against those who do such things is based on truth...because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed. God “will give to each person according to what he has

done”...for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil **2/2,5F,8F Q PS 62/12, PR 24/12**

What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith [unbelief] nullify God’s faithfulness [to himself, his nature, and thus his judgement]? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written, “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.” But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?...Their [those who argue thus and live accordingly] condemnation is deserved. **3/3-6,8B Q PS 51/4**

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all. We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: “There is no-one righteous, not even one...there is no-one who does good, not even one”...Now we know that whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth [not only Gentile but Jew also] may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. **3/9F,12B,19 Q PS 14/1FF, 53/1FF**

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life. **2 CO 2/15F**

unless you repent, you too will all perish. **LK 13/3,5 VS JN 3/16**

the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing... **1 CO 1/18**

if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. **2 CO 4/3**

[the work of Satan displayed] in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved...all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. **2 TH 2/10,12**

these men...are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish. **2 PE 2/12 VS 3/9**

As for you, you [are] dead in your transgressions and sins...[you are] by nature objects of wrath...without hope and without God (Ep 2/1,3,12) **PP 1/28**

stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved^

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? **HE 2/1FF CF. 3/7-19, 6/4-8**

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under-foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. **10/26-31 Q DT 32/35F**

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Once more I will shake not only the earth but the heavens”...Therefore, let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire. **12/25F,28F**

weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you...Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. **JA 5/1,3**

false teachers...will secretly introduce destructive heresies...bringing swift destruction on themselves...Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgement; if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people...; if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;...if this is so, then the Lord knows how to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgement, while continuing their punishment...Blackest darkness is reserved for them. (2 Pe 2)

certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago...I want to remind you that the Lord destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels...who abandoned their own home – these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgement on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah...serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire...These men are... wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever... ‘See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way’...snatch others from the fire and save them (Jude)

I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one “like a son of man” with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand... ‘Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe.’ The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God’s wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1600 stadia [i.e. 180m/300 km]. **RE 14/14,18FF**

With justice he judges and makes war...He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood...He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty...Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great...The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. **19/11,13,15,17F,21 CF. IS 63/1-6**

The devil was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur...They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it...And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books...each person was judged according to what he had done...The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. **20/11-15**

These many texts and passages, often overlooked, paint a vivid backdrop to the NT’s main message & story. When we share the message of the NT, we rightly do not focus on the backdrop. We focus on the actors and their words and actions: Jesus, and what God came to say and do through him and his disciples. But both what Jesus said and did, and what his apostles said and did, only make sense against the backdrop. ^

the play (favour/gospel) does not negate/remove the backdrop as if it no longer exists – it’s still there

In particular, the backdrop to the main NT message/revelation is made up of at least these 5 things:

The full revelation of God

Everything that God has revealed to be true of himself, the fullness of his nature (vs diminish/dilute/distort)

What is the dominant truth about God for the believer is not the whole truth about God (for the unbeliever)

Includes his holiness, hate, wrath, judgment, severity (also his sovereignty, jealousy, transcendence)

‘God is not angry with you’: God’s wrath against sin and sinner is not a contradiction of this time of favour

Air-brushing of *In Christ alone*: without holiness, wrath, judgement, etc, cross makes no sense

God’s wrath means that just as he is good to those who fear&obey him, so he is terrible to those who do not

God’s wrath does not compromise his love – it heightens it! Ditto: judgement/grace; goodness/severity...

The truth about man

A proud, independent rebel, deserving only death and hell (vs secular humanism, eastern mysticism)

Big God, small man & good God, bad man small God, big man & good man, bad God

Yes, man is a paradox of glory and shame, but in essence: Ge 6/5, Je 17/9, Lk 11/13, Mk 7/14-23, Ep 2/3,12

“wretch”; “deserve”; “good person”; “self-esteem” (vs 1 Co 15/10, Ep 3/8, 1 Ti 1/15...Ro 7/18: we adopt the concept because it *sounds* like something Scripture encourages us to feel about ourselves but there is a world of diff between believing that there is something in our nature worthy of respect/admiration and knowing that we have worth/value because we’re created in God’s image, despite our best attempts to wreck it)

The seriousness of sin

vs downplaying/removal of sin from gospel: gospel is good news because there is first bad news (before gospel can be good news for bad people it must be bad news for 'good' people). The Gospel: 2. Man's Sin.

PS 36/1-2! 'guilt trip' (vs "he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin & righteousness & judgement")

If struggle with cross, judgement, etc, too weak an understanding of the seriousness of sin / holiness of God

The fact of judgement

In this life and next; 'no-one can judge me', God won't/can't judge me'

The reality of hell

Yes, in offering salvation we point to heaven; once saved, our gaze is on that (we long & prepare for it)

Bible is a road map to heaven not hell, so focuses on heaven – but without denying hell

cf. Dt 30/15,19: the alternative to life/prosperity/blessings is not nothing but death/destruction/curses

But not everyone goes to heaven (vs 'looking down from above' etc when people die)

Why shouldn't people get saved because of a fear of judgement/hell (convict&draw, stick&carrot) cf. ChH

These 5 together make up the backdrop to the 'play' – the actors and their words & deeds on the stage. They are not your main message – but your message makes no sense (it is not sufficiently explained or emphasized) if not acted out against this backdrop. You need all 5 of the above to make sense of the Incarnation and cross, to give the gospel and salvation its full force and attractiveness.

You may have noticed that certain words kept recurring in the texts I read out earlier: cursed, condemned, destroyed, perishing, wrath, judgement, hell (fire, darkness, punishment). Let me illustrate play vs backdrop by looking at just one of those. We rightly celebrate that for us there is no longer any condemnation (Ro 8/1 cf. Jn 3/18a, 5/24), and we tell unbelievers that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save it (Jn 3/17 cf. 8/11) – this is the NT's main message. But we must remember that the NT says plainly (& many more times) that those outside of Christ and who those refuse him *will* be condemned (21x: Mw 12/37&41f, 23/33, Mk 16/16, Lk 11/31f, Jn 3/18b, 5/29, 12/48, Ro 3/8, 5/16&18, 1 Co 11/32, Ga 1/8f, 2 Th 2/12, Tt 3/11, 2 Pe 2/3, Jx 1/4, Re 19/2) – this is the backdrop that highlights the main message.

When we share the gospel, we may not emphasize the backdrop or any part of it. But it is usually necessary to reference it somewhere along the line. At the very least, the messenger needs to be aware of it so he does not twist God, man, grace or salvation into something they're not.[^] We have to remain aware of the bigger picture, of how people (outside of Christ) currently stand with God, and not fudge that. If we forget, ignore or dilute the backdrop, not only will we will misrepresent God, man, grace and salvation, but we will offer an anaemic, powerless, optional 'gospel', we will work against ourselves, we will bring forth stillborn converts, or those who don't last the distance because they were never convinced of their desperate need.

Likewise, when we instruct believers, we may not emphasize the backdrop every time. But it is wise to remind even Christians of it from time to time, so they remain mindful of the true nature and full wonder of their salvation, so *they* don't twist God/grace/salvation into something they're not, and so they convey the balanced truth about these things when sharing the good news of God's time of favour with unbelievers.

It is the backdrop that enables us to know God as he truly is (terrible and beautiful, awful and wonderful).

It is the backdrop that allows us to see ourselves in correct relation to him (justly condemned and without any claim of our own vs I'm OK, I deserve, I do God a favour by accepting him).

It is the backdrop only that makes sense of the Incarnation (why Jesus came) and crucifixion (why he died).

It is the backdrop that gives relevance and attractiveness to the gospel (it is good news precisely because there is already bad news).

It is the backdrop that enables us to rightly understand and live in grace (vs cheap grace, greasy grace, grace that cost God nothing and encourages me to keep on sinning).

It is the backdrop that adds urgency to our evangelism (how can they hear, so believe, so call on, and so be saved, without someone preaching to them?)

And it is the backdrop that makes mission imperative (if there is no fire, why a fire service: if there is no judgement and hell, mission is an appalling waste).

Downplaying or dismissing the backdrop puts truth and souls at risk. We forget the backdrop at our peril.