

Heirs of the Promise

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.”
—***Galatians 3:29,***
New American Standard Bible

AFTER JESUS WAS RAISED

from the dead, he appeared to his disciples on a number of occasions. He convinced them “by many infallible proofs” that he was alive again, and spoke to them of “things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” (Acts 1:3)

During the last of these appearances, the disciples boldly asked him, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (vs. 6) It is evident from this, that Jesus’ disciples were now convinced beyond any doubt that he was the Messiah of promise, the one whose kingdom was to be set up in Jerusalem and which would extend its influence throughout the entire world. Naturally, they also concluded that first in order would be the reestablishment of Israel’s kingdom, which had been overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar centuries before.

Jesus’ reply to their inquiry concerning Israel’s kingdom was not a direct answer to the disciples’

question. Nevertheless, it was very revealing, for it indicated that there was yet a great work to be done before the Messianic kingdom, for which they hoped and longed, would be established. Jesus said to his disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power." To this he added, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."—vss. 7,8

Whatever expectation these ardent followers of the Master may have had of immediately becoming associated with him in a powerful government which would eventually rule the whole world, they soon realized from his response that there was no prospect of at once entering into kingdom glory. The task assigned was a comprehensive one, and though they may have thought of the "earth" as being that relatively small area which we now speak of as the "Middle East," it still would require time to "be witnesses unto" Jesus throughout even this limited territory.

The disciples waited at Jerusalem as Jesus instructed until they received the Holy Spirit. (Luke 24:49) This gift of "power from on high" came upon them on the Day of Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-4) It was a wonderful and miraculous demonstration of the favor of God upon this little company of despised disciples of the Nazarene who had been charged with treason against Rome and put to death.

Under the influence of this holy power, the Apostle Peter preached a moving sermon to the thousands of Jews who had assembled within reach of his

voice. (Acts 2:5-36) He boldly charged them with the sin of crucifying Jesus, with the result that many of them were “pricked in their heart” and inquired, “What shall we do?” Peter’s reply to this question was, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.” As a result of Peter’s words, “the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”—vss. 37-41

THE CHURCH

In Peter’s reply to the repentant Jews who asked what they should do, he introduced a new aspect of the Messianic hope contained in the promise to Abraham that through his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. He assured them that as Israelites this promise was given to them and their children. He added, however, that it would also be extended to the Gentiles, those who were considered “afar off” by the Jews, so that “as many as the Lord our God shall call,” would be given the opportunity to be heirs of the promise made to Abraham.

The “three thousand” who heard Peter’s Pentecostal sermon, and responded in accordance with his instructions, were among those whom the Lord called. In addition, the Lord “added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (vs. 47) The word translated “church” in this verse is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “a calling out,” and appears over one hundred times in the New Testament. Thus

the church is composed only of those whom the Lord calls. God never intended that the whole world should be brought into this special arrangement.

The church is a called group of believers who accept Jesus as their Head, and consecrate, or dedicate, their lives to the doing of God's will. The Apostle Paul said this dedication is likened to a burial, or baptism, into Christ, describing it as being "buried with him by baptism into death." (Rom. 6:3,4) Concerning this called class, Paul also wrote: "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:27,28) Our opening text immediately follows, stating that those who thus "belong to Christ" will be heirs of the Abrahamic promise.

These statements of the apostle show that the called-out ones—those who constitute the true church of Christ because they have accepted his headship in their lives, and are faithful to that calling—are considered by God to be part of the promised seed which is to be the agency for blessing all the families of the earth. This explains why the work of blessing all nations did not begin with the First Advent of Jesus. It also explains why, when the disciples asked about the reestablishment of David's kingdom, he indicated that first they were to be his witnesses throughout all the earth. Indeed, it is through this witness work that God calls various individuals to be part of the assembly which he identifies as the church, and which, under Christ, will constitute the spiritual seed of Abraham.—Gal. 3:16,29; Heb. 2:9,10,16

THE GENTILES

The rapid influx of believing Israelites into the church beginning at Pentecost only continued for a short time. The Jewish religious leaders fiercely opposed the work, and before long it was merely one here and one there who accepted the Gospel when it was presented to them. God knew that it would be this way. Since he had predetermined the number he wanted in the church as the “faith” seed of Abraham, he also prearranged that in due time his call would be extended to the Gentiles.

The first Gentile convert identified following Pentecost was Cornelius, “a centurion of the band called the Italian band.” He was, the narrative states, “a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway. He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter: He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.”—Acts 10:1-6

For centuries the Jewish people had been schooled in the belief that they alone were God’s chosen race. Indeed, God had said to them, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” (Amos 3:2) They supposed they alone were the inheritors of the promises made to their father, Abraham, concerning the seed that was to bless all

nations. For this reason, even Jesus' apostles were not fully prepared for the great change in God's arrangements which permitted Gentiles, through faith and obedience, to become fellow heirs with them of the promises of God.

Having selected Peter as his servant to proclaim the Gospel to Cornelius, God knew that he would need special preparation for this assignment. As the men sent by Cornelius neared Joppa with a message for Peter, the Lord gave a vision to the apostle while he was praying on the roof of Simon the tanner's home. "He became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven."—Acts 10:9-16

Coming out of the trance, Peter was perplexed, and wondered what the vision meant which he had just seen. As he pondered this, the messengers sent by Cornelius arrived at Simon's home and asked whether Peter was there. Then, "while Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I

have sent them. Then Peter went down to the men which were sent unto him from Cornelius; and said, Behold, I am he whom ye seek: what is the cause wherefore ye are come?"—Acts 10:17-21

The three messengers related to Peter the purpose of their visit, explaining that Cornelius had been directed by an angel of God to send for him, and that he would explain to Cornelius what he ought to do. The messengers were invited to remain overnight, and the next day Peter accompanied them on their return to Cornelius, who lived in Caesarea. In expectation of their arrival, Cornelius "called together his kinsmen and near friends."—vss. 22-24

After meeting Cornelius, Peter entered the home where this little company of Gentiles had assembled. "He said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. Therefore came I unto you without gainsaying [hesitation, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*], as soon as I was sent for: I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me?"—vss. 28-29

CORNELIUS AND HIS HOUSEHOLD ACCEPT

Peter properly understood the lesson of the sheet filled with unclean animals which God had called clean. Upon the basis of this he went to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and now he wanted to know what further responsibilities devolved upon him. Cornelius related his experience of being visited by an angel of God, who instructed him to send for Peter, and the assurance the angel had provided that Peter would speak unto him. Concluding, Cornelius said,

“Immediately therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.”—vss. 30-33

Peter then preached a short sermon to his Gentile audience, recorded in verses 34-43. He explained that Jesus was specially appointed by God, and commissioned to be the judge both of the “quick”—the living—and the “dead.” In this, one of the great foundations of the Gospel which was first preached to Abraham is emphasized. It is the fact that through the promised seed, the dead would be restored to life. Peter also assured Cornelius and his friends that through Christ they could receive “remission of sins.”

While he was yet speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon the gathering, giving the same evidence of God’s acceptance of these Gentiles into his family as had been given to the Jewish disciples on the Day of Pentecost. Witnessing this, Peter said, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord.”—vss. 44-48

THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE

Peter was prepared to accept the fact that Gentiles could now, through faith and obedience, enter into the family of God and become fellow heirs of God’s promises with Jewish believers. However, others in the Early Church had not been specially enlightened. As a result, a controversy developed among them. None was inclined to keep Gentile believers out of the church, but there were

those who insisted that they could not obtain salvation unless they were circumcised.—Acts 15:1

Because of this controversy, it was considered wise to hold a conference in Jerusalem to weigh this issue and decide upon some official position to take with respect to the Gentile believers. Meanwhile, these were increasing in numbers, especially as a result of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, who were present at the Jerusalem conference and bore eloquent testimony of the marvelous manner in which God was manifesting his favor toward Gentile believers. Peter also told of his experience in connection with Cornelius.—vss. 2-12

James appears to have been the chairman of this conference. After hearing the testimonies of Paul and Peter, he answered, saying, “Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon [Peter] hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.” (vss. 13,14) James was convinced that now, for the first time, God was “visiting” the Gentiles, and inviting non-Jewish believers to participate in his plan. As he stated it, God was taking out from the Gentiles a people for his name—those who would be members of his family and, through Christ, bear his name as sons. This was the opportunity which Jesus first extended to all in the Jewish nation, but only a few accepted. We read concerning this that Jesus “came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.”—John 1:11,12

Beginning with Cornelius, God turned to the Gentiles, as he had previously favored the Jews, for the purpose of calling and selecting those who

would constitute his “house of sons.” James reminds us that all of God’s works are foreknown by him. (Acts 15:18) It was not a failure of his plan that caused him to turn to the Gentiles. Jesus had prophesied that the Gospel would be “preached in all the world for a witness.” (Matt. 24:14) Moreover, as God looks upon them, those whom he calls are “neither Jew nor Greek,” but are “all one in Christ Jesus.”—Gal. 3:28

“AFTER THIS”

After explaining that God had visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name, James added, “To this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the Tabernacle of David, . . . That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called.” (Acts 15:15-17) James did not say that the coming of the Gentiles into the church in his day was the fulfillment of the words of the prophets concerning “all the Gentiles.” Rather, he said it was in agreement, or harmony, with those prophecies.

The time when “the residue of men” and “all the Gentiles” will be given their opportunity to call upon God is after the building again of the Tabernacle, or house, of David. Prior to this, as James says, must be the work of calling out from the Gentiles a people for the Lord’s name. When the disciples asked Jesus, “Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” he could have explained this point in detail. However, the disciples, not having received the Holy Spirit, and not being otherwise prepared for it, could not

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(Continued from page 31) have understood an explanation which involved inviting Gentiles to become fellow heirs with them in the hope of reigning with Christ. Thus he simply told them that their commission for the present was to go into all the world as his witnesses, beginning at Jerusalem.

Jesus is the one who is to sit on “the throne of David, . . . to order it, and to establish it.” (Isa. 9:6,7) The sons of God of the present age, called from both Jews and Gentiles, are to share in that kingdom with him. Hence, its establishment must wait until all of these are gathered out from the world and are proven worthy, even unto death, for the exalted position to which they are called.—Rom. 8:16,17; II Tim. 2:11,12; Rev. 2:10

This work of taking out from the Gentiles a people for God’s name has lasted nearly two thousand years, and it is still in progress. Meanwhile, countless millions, in a professed sense, have associated themselves with the name of Christ. Yet, the vast majority of these have had no conception of the divine purpose centered in his Son, or what it really means to be one of his footstep followers.

The masses of Christianity have not known that Jesus was sent into the world in fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob concerning a “seed” which would ultimately bless “all the families of the earth.” (Gen. 22:18; 28:14) Neither have they known that by suffering and dying with Jesus, his consecrated footstep followers qualify to be joint-heirs with him in the inheritance of the Abrahamic promise and that they, too, can thus be part of the seed through which blessings of life and happiness will yet flow out to all mankind.

Nevertheless, the work of calling, selecting, and proving those who will constitute the people for his name—the heirs of promise—has gone steadily on, unnoticed and unknown to most. The world has not known these in their true light, even as it did not know Jesus. (I John 3:1) Many times true believers have been persecuted by the world and by churches claiming the name of Christ, just as Jesus was persecuted by his own Jewish brethren. (Luke 21:12; John 15:19,20; II Tim. 3:12) The “enmity” [hostility, *Strong’s Dictionary*] which the Creator said would exist between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman has often led to acute suffering by these, even as it led to the crucifixion of Jesus.—Gen. 3:13-15

BLESSINGS TO ALL FAMILIES OF THE EARTH

Eventually this phase of God’s plan, the completion of the “seed,” will be finished. Then will follow the glorious consummation of his divine purpose, the blessing of all the families of the earth. It will be then that the antitypical kingdom of David, with Christ and his church as its rulers, will govern and “judge the world in righteousness.” (Acts 17:31) It will be through the agencies of that kingdom in the hands of Jesus and his joint-heirs that all the families of the earth will be blessed.

This will be the purpose of reestablishing the throne of David with Christ as king. As James expressed it, “That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.” (Acts 15:17) God’s promise concerning the seed not only gave assurance that he would provide a Deliverer, but also that all nations would be

blessed through him. (Gen. 22:18; Acts 3:25) All Gentiles and Jews as well, will be the recipients of the promised blessings of the kingdom, which will flow to them through Christ and his faithful “little flock,” called from among both Jews and Gentiles to be associated with him.—Luke 12:32

God has foreknown and foretold his wonderful works on behalf of the children of men. Let us rejoice in “the hope set before us,” that if faithful followers of Jesus, we will be “heirs of promise,” and associated with him in the rulership of the Messianic kingdom. (Heb. 6:17-19) Let us also be joyful that mankind in general—the living and those who have died—will be given an opportunity, through belief and obedience, to be restored to perfection of human life here on the earth. Truly, ours is a great and wonderful God! ■