

# Separation from God

**THE CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS WORLD** was given more to think about as a consequence of public announcements made by Pope John Paul II in late July and early August 1999. He presented views on heaven and hell to tourists who gather Wednesday afternoons at the Vatican to see him. His public announcements were reported in the news media through many outlets, including the *“Washington Post”* and affiliated newspapers in mid-August. The press release said, under the caption: “Pope’s Revelation Is Causing Hell of a Controversy”:

“Pope John Paul II has just revealed what the tabloids are calling ‘a shocking truth’ about heaven and hell, and his revelation is turning into a serious theological sore point between Roman Catholics and American Protestant evangelicals.

“In several recently public appearances, the pope took a few minutes to muse on the nature of heaven, hell and purgatory for the audience of some 7,000 tourists who gather every Wednesday afternoon at the Vatican. ‘Forget the popular notion of actual physical places—fluffy clouds above, an inky inferno below’—he told the audience. ‘Think of hell as a state of mind, a self-willed exile from God.’

“‘Heaven,’ he said in late July, ‘is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but a living and personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. Better to think of hell,’ he explained the next week, ‘as more than a physical place, as the state of those who freely and definitely separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.’

“The pope’s discourse reflected more his tendency toward philosophical abstraction than new Catholic ‘discovery.’ Catholic teaching does not deny that hell may be a geographical spot where God will banish sinners but considers that concept merely a visual aid based on scant biblical references.

“The pope was describing instead what Catholics consider the core essence of hell: knowledge that you failed to choose salvation in God. But to Protestant fundamentalists in the United States, who prefer the

physical burning pit described in the Bible, any suggestion that hell is simply an abstraction is a dangerous, even blasphemous notion.

“Copies of the pope’s speeches began circulating among evangelical leaders, who accused the pontiff of ‘soft selling hell,’ said R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptists Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY.

“My concern here is the temptation to make hell a state of mind, to *psychologize* hell,’ said Mohler. ‘As attractive as that may be to the modern mind, that is not the hell of the Bible. Jesus himself spoke of hell as a lake of fire, where the worms would not die and the fire would not be quenched. It’s all very graphic.’”

From Hieronymus Bosch to the creators of the animated TV series “South Park,” artists, writers and theologians have tried to mentally transport Christians to a miserable place called hell as a sure deterrent to sin. Early Christians tried to locate hell as a spot on the sun or a comet, but most used their imagination to keep alive the image of a Gothic torture chamber. Lately though, that image is fading, say evangelicals, as modern Americans focus less on the wages of sin and more on the uplifting message of self-help. While 70 percent of Americans say they believe in heaven, only 50 percent believe in hell.

## **CONCEPTS OF HELL**

“*The Orlando Sentinel*” published the reactions of area religious leaders to this papal pronouncement, and considered other concepts, saying:

“The pontiff’s remarks surprised a few area religious leaders who supported his position.

“The pope basically reiterated standard Catholic teaching, that hell is a state, rather than a place, said the Rev. Joseph Hart of Orlando’s Mary, Queen of the Universe Shrine.

“There is very little known about hell,’ Hart said. ‘You can’t use hell as a deterrent, like the electric chair.’”

The Rev. Charles Horton of College Park Baptist Church agrees.

“I think the pope has helped us to bring about an awareness of the fact that people make a virtual hell on earth for themselves by their choices

and lifestyle,' he said. 'Hell is eternal separation from God's love. A separation from God is worse than fire.'"

For Lutherans, hell is "the logical consequence of the choices that human beings make in excluding God from our lives," said the Rev. Barry Snowden, of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Oviedo.

The concept of hell has long had a hold on the popular imagination. Dante, in the 14th century, told a story of cosmic rebellion in which Satan (Lucifer) and his angels rebelled against God, only to be cast out of heaven, and into their underworld domain.

In the 1700's, scientists thought hell might be on the sun or a comet. In the past decade, *Trinity Broadcasting Network* and other evangelical organizations spread tales that in Russia, a microphone lowered two miles below the surface of the earth had recorded the sound of souls in torment.

The notion of a physical hell after death predates Christianity.

For ancient Greeks, it was Hades, surrounded by the River Styx. The dead were ferried across by the boatman, Charon. Their concept of the afterlife evolved from a muddy bog to what the philosopher Plato called a place of "temporary punishment for the curably wicked and eternal punishment for the incurably wicked."

For Greek Orthodox Christians, hell is "a separation from God, that in our exercise of free will we bring upon ourselves," said the Rev. Mark Elliott of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Maitland. "The soul is in torment because it is separated from God."

In the Old Testament, some believe it is the underworld of *Sheol*, which can be translated simply as 'the grave.' Other rabbis, in the 2nd century B.C., believed it was *Gehenna*, named for an infamous valley south of Jerusalem where an early pagan cult sacrificed children. *Gehenna* was considered "a cosmic disposal site for the wicked," according to historian Alan Weinstein, author of "*The Formation of Hell*."

"Today, Jews don't talk much about hell from the pulpit," said Rabbi Alan Londy, of Temple Israel in Orlando.

## **THE MEANING OF DEATH**

The real separation from the living God is death. (Matt. 22:32) Conspicuous by its absence is a definition of death in the papal announcement, as well as all the other commentaries. Yet, to understand a concept it is so important to define terms being used.

Death is man's greatest enemy; and the Bible alone, of all the sources of information available to man, furnishes us with definite information concerning the future of those who are struck down by this dread monster. God's Word promises that a time is coming when there "shall be no more death;" and furthermore, that those who have died shall live again. (Rev. 21:4; John 5:28) A knowledge of the Creator's provision for a dying race should be a real solace to those who mourn for their beloved dead.

Added to the ghastly specter of death itself, is the almost universal uncertainty of what lies beyond the grave. What happens to an individual the next moment after the heart stops beating? Is that individual still alive in some mysterious way, actually hovering around the undertaker's parlors while his friends are gathered to mourn his passing? Or has he departed to some unknown and 'beautiful isle of somewhere'? Or, in the event that the deceased was not a Christian, is he now in the traditional regions of the damned, where he is doomed to suffer an eternity of torture in a hell of fire and brimstone?

It is difficult to entirely dismiss these questions from our minds. We may partially console ourselves in the thought that at least many of our close friends and relatives who have died were good characters, and faithful believers in Christianity as they understood it, and hence, according to our accepted beliefs should now be happy in heaven. Yet, all of us have had some dear friends, and probably relatives, who have died outside the pale of orthodox belief and practice, and we cannot help wondering what has become of these. Are they now suffering, or are they happy?

## **SCIENCE HOLDS NO HOPE**

Science tells us that there is no evidence of the continuance of human life after the heart stops beating. This being an age of materialism, many are inclined to accept this view. The claim is that so far as the life principle is concerned, man is no different than the lower animals; that the higher intelligence of the human species is not due to the traditional

theory that man has hidden within him a separate intelligence called a ‘soul’ or a ‘spirit,’ but to the fact that he possesses a superior, a more refined, organism than does the brute creation.

The following are a few of the scriptural passages which show clearly that science is right as far as the present condition of the dead is concerned. Ecclesiastes 9:5 reads, “The living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing.” Psalm 49:10-12 is also to the point: “Wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless, man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish.”

In Genesis 2:7 we are told that “the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Later, after the transgression of this originally-perfect pair, God said, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Gen. 3:19) In Psalm 146:4, David makes an emphatic declaration as to the condition of those who return to the dust. We quote, “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.” There is no mistaking the fact that these words describe a dead man as being absolutely unconscious, even his thoughts having perished.

The psalmist explains, ‘His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth.’ If a man, as a conscious, living being, was brought into existence by the union of the material body with the breath of life, it would seem reasonable that when these two elements are separated, life would cease; and this is exactly what the text states: ‘In that very day his thoughts perish.’

Some may wonder about the ‘breath of life,’ thinking perhaps this may be that traditional ‘something-or-other’ that continues to live on after the body dies. A Biblical passage describes the *process* of dying, showing exactly what becomes of the two principal elements which Divine, creative wisdom has combined to produce human life. It reads: “Then shall the *dust* return to the earth as it was; and the *spirit* shall return unto God who gave it.”—Eccles. 12:7

The key to a proper understanding of this text is found in the word ‘return,’ used with respect to both the body and the spirit. The body is said to return to the earth. This is because its elements originally came from the earth. It follows, therefore, that if the spirit returns to God, it must have been with God before it entered the human organism. If to be with God in this sense means to be in heaven, then it follows that if the ‘spirit’ here referred to is a conscious entity, capable of enjoying life in a spiritual heaven, it means that every one of us must have been in a spiritual heaven before we were born; else it could not be said that we ‘return’ when we die.

### **WHAT THE ‘SPIRIT’ REALLY IS**

The Hebrew word here translated ‘spirit,’ is *ruwach*. *Strong’s Bible Concordance* is a noted authority on the Hebrew and Greek languages. It defines this Hebrew word *ruwach* as ‘wind,’ or ‘breath.’ It is the same Hebrew word that is translated ‘breath’ in Genesis 7:15, where it is said to be possessed by the lower animals. We quote: “They went in unto Noah into the ark, two and two of all flesh, wherein is the breath [*ruwach*] of life.” If the use of the word *ruwach* to describe the breath or spirit of life in human beings means that we have within us an intelligent entity of some sort that continues to live after the body dies, it also means that the lower animals inherently possess a similar intangible something which can never die.

But when we reason in harmony with the Word of God, all is clear. Genesis 2:7 declares that God created man out of the dust of the ground and ‘man became a living soul.’ Obviously, when the body returns to the earth, and the breath or spirit of life returns to its original source—to God who gave it—it leaves the individual in exactly the same condition as he was before birth, which was a condition of nonexistence.

To settle this question even more definitely we need only to turn to Ecclesiastes 3:19-21, where the Hebrew word *ruwach* is again used, and there it is said that the breath (*ruwach*) of both man and beast goes to the same place at death. We quote: “That which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath [*ruwach*]; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth [that] the spirit of

man that goeth upward [to heaven], and [that] the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?”

The records of the New Testament on the subject of death agree fully with those of the Old Testament. Jesus indicates that the dead are in a condition of unconsciousness, which he likens to sleep. In John 11:1-46 we have a wonderfully revealing account of the sickness, death, and awakening of Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus. Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, were also friends of the Master, and when their brother was taken sick they sent word to Jesus supposing that he would come at once to their aid.

But, instead of going immediately to the bedside of his friend Lazarus, Jesus tarried. After some time had elapsed, he said to his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.” (vs. 11) The disciples misunderstood this, supposing that Jesus referred to natural sleep. Then he said plainly, “Lazarus is *dead*.” (vs. 14) A little later, at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus addressed this dead one in a loud voice saying, “Lazarus, come forth.” And we are told that “He that was *dead* came forth.” (vss. 43,44) Not a hint here that Lazarus’ ‘soul’ was either in a heaven of bliss, or a hell of torment. According to the record, he was asleep in death. Jesus believed in the ‘sleep of death.’

In the account of the awakening of Lazarus from the sleep of death we have emphasized the fact that the scriptural hope for life beyond the grave is in the assurance that there is to be a *resurrection* of the dead, rather than in the supposition that man possesses inherent immortality. The Apostle Paul fully agrees with this. In I Corinthians 15:12-18, he concludes that if there be no resurrection of the dead, then “they ... which are fallen asleep in Christ are *perished*.”

In Revelation, we also find the same uniformity of thought as to the unconscious condition of the dead. The Revelator says, “The sea gave up the *dead* which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the *dead* which were in them.” (Rev. 20:13) According to the text just quoted, those that are in the scriptural ‘hell’ are declared to be dead. This means that they are *not* alive and being tormented. The text also reveals that the hope of the dead is that they shall be *brought out* of hell—raised to life.

The answer to the question, ‘Where are the dead?’ is that they are now in a state of unconsciousness; that all hope for life beyond the grave is

centered in the scriptural assurance that through the mighty power of the great Creator, exercised by the Divine Christ during the coming kingdom period, there is to be a “resurrection of the dead, both of the just [righteous] and unjust [unrighteous].”—Acts 24:15

## **SATAN’S LIE**

What was the origin of the false theory so generally accepted in both heathendom and Christendom, that ‘there is no death’? The Bible so clearly teaches that death is a grim reality, and man’s worse enemy. From whence came the idea that it is a friend, and the gateway into another life?

The answer to these questions is found in the Genesis account of the fall of man into sin and death. Satan, operating through the serpent, in discussing the matter with mother Eve prior to the transgression that brought death, said, “Ye *shall not* surely die.” (Gen. 3:4) God has said that the penalty for disobedience would be death—“Thou *shalt* surely die.” (Gen. 2:17) The testimony of the entire Bible is consistent with this original statement of what would constitute the penalty for sin. “The wages of sin is death,” declares Paul. (Rom. 6:23) “The soul that sinneth, it shall die,” says Ezekiel.—Ezek. 18:4.

In Revelation 20:2,3, the thought is expressed that the ‘old serpent’ who deceived mother Eve has continued to be a deceiver ever since. History reveals that this is indeed true. Every deceptive effort possible has been made throughout the ages to bolster up Satan’s lie, “Ye shall not surely die.” As a result, nearly everybody today who attempts to believe in a future existence at all, bases his faith on the supposition that man possesses inherent immortality; whereas, the Scriptures are clear on this point saying, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” See: Ezekiel 18:4. See also: Acts 2:22-36; 3:13-15.

The condition of death is oblivion, or nonexistence. All who are in this condition are separated from the Bible’s living God.

# Maintaining Continuity

**Key Verse:** “*The LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed.*”  
—Deuteronomy 31:8

**Selected Scripture:**  
Deuteronomy 31:1-8;  
34:5-9

**MOSES WAS NEARING THE** end of his life. Although a faithful servant of the Lord in leading the nation of Israel for a period of forty years, yet because of disobedience at the waters of Meribah (Num. 20:7-13) he was not permitted to cross the Jordan River or to enter the land of promise. (His age was a deterrent, also.) Indeed, God told him, “Thou shalt not go over this Jordan.”—Deut. 31:2

God had instructed Moses that Joshua, the son of Nun, would be the one to take the staff of leadership from Moses and lead the Israelites over Jordan and into the land of Canaan. Even though the ‘wilderness’ experiences of the people were about to end, yet many more tests of their faith and reliance upon God would come in the ensuing years after the departure of Moses.

Knowing this, Moses provided words of encouragement to the people. He reassured them that God would go before them, and would destroy all those nations who might stand in the way of their occupation of the land promised to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (vss. 1-5) He continues, “Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”—vs. 6

After speaking to the people in general, Moses then focused his words specifically upon Joshua, telling him to be strong and of good courage, that it is he whom God had chosen to take the people into the land sworn to their fathers. (vs. 7) Moses wanted to be sure that there was no misunderstanding on the part of any as to who would be the human agency God intended to use to lead them after his death.

Then, to give further reassurance to Joshua, he said: “The Lord, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed.”—vs. 8

Shortly after giving these final words of encouragement to Joshua, Moses died at the age of 120 years, his physical senses functioning strongly to the very end of his life. As Deuteronomy 34:7 states: “His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.” As we focus on the privileges we have to serve God and his eternal purposes, it is also important for us to realize the need to be of comfort and encouragement to others in the way—particularly those whose years of experience are fewer in the Lord’s service than ours.

We should be quick to point out to them, just as Moses did to Joshua, that God will be with them. He will destroy those enemies of the New Creature which would seek to harm them, and that they should be strong and of good courage. Therefore all should claim the promise: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.”—Heb. 13:5

“If [Since] God be for us, who can be against us?”—Rom. 8:31

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## Going Forward in Faith

*Key Verse: “Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”*  
—Joshua 1:9

*Selected Scripture:  
Joshua 3:7-17*

**JOSHUA’S FIRST MAJOR** test of faith and leadership of the Israelites came quickly following the death of Moses. The nation had arrived at the Jordan River, which was unusually high due to recent flooding.—See Joshua 3:15

The river was impassable by all human standards, but to enter the land of promise necessitated crossing it. God encouraged Joshua by reminding him, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee.”—Josh. 3:7

The instructions which God gave to Joshua, and which he in turn gave to the Israelites, were simple— but required much faith. The priests that carried the Ark of the Covenant were instructed to go to the brim of the river. As soon as the

soles of their feet touched the river, the waters would separate and form dry ground upon which they could walk, carrying the Ark into the midst of the river. There they were instructed to stand, holding forth the Ark, while all the people crossed the riverbed on dry ground.—vss. 8-17

The Lord’s promise did not fail. “As they that bare the Ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the Ark were dipped in the brim of the water, (for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,) That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho. And the priests that bare the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan.—vss. 15-

Two important lessons concerning faith are contained in this experience of the Israelites. First, it was necessary for them to put their complete reliance upon the power of God to perform the miracle of separating the waters of Jordan. The same is true with us. Without the power of God working on our behalf, we could never hope to attain our promised ‘Canaan.’ His power has been manifested to us through his Son, our Lord Jesus, who bought us with his precious blood. As Jesus said, “Without me ye can do nothing.”—John 15:5

The second lesson of faith contained in this experience is that the Israelites were required to act on their faith. They had to actually walk across the Jordan, confident that the Lord would not allow the waters to return until they were all safely over. It is also true with us that we must act on our faith. “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” (James 2: 17) The Apostle Peter describes the ‘works’ that we ‘add’ to our faith, as including faith in the promises of God. Let the words of our *Key Verse* echo in our hearts, as they did in Joshua’s: ‘The Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.’

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# Overcoming Obstacles

***Key Verse: “It came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the LORD hath given you the city.”***  
—Joshua 6:16

***Selected Scripture: Joshua 6:1-5, 15-20***

**THE WICKED CITY OF** Jericho was a formidable obstacle for the Israelites to overcome as they began the process of possessing the land of Canaan. Not only did it have a valiant army and powerful king, but the city was completely walled in. It was a fortress which seemed impenetrable.

These conditions afforded God an opportunity to exercise his mighty power and invincibility on behalf of his people once again.

Before Joshua had been given the first word of instruction, God emphatically stated, “See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour.” (Josh. 6:2) The message is clear that if God chooses to act in a particular way, the outcome is most certain.

“So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” (Isa. 55:11) God’s instructions to Joshua seemed rather unusual and, by themselves, must have required a great measure of faith. All the men of war, with the seven priests blowing their rams’ horns, were to encompass the city once a day, for six days.

On the seventh day, after the seventh time around, they were to sound a long blast with their horns, and the people were to make a great shout, at which the wall would fall and they would take the city. The wall would fall, and the city would be taken easily, because the people and armies of Jericho would be in utter confusion.—Josh. 6:3-16

Joshua and the Israelites obeyed the word of the Lord and did everything as instructed. Even as they did this, Joshua reminded them that it was not their victory, but God's. As he stated, 'the Lord hath given you the city.' The wall indeed fell, and they took the city.—vs. 20

As we strive to conquer the foes that at times seem so impenetrable to us as natural men, we, too, must realize that the power of God works in many different ways to perform his will through us. As the Prophet Isaiah says, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear."—Isa. 59:1

We have at our disposal the greatest power in the universe—God himself! We must be humble, submitting to his use of that power to our highest spiritual benefit, rather than trying to fight the enemy according to our own fleshly tendencies. This would surely lead to failure.

We should always remember that in all of our battles it is the Lord who is in control. He assures us of the victory if we keep our faith and trust in him, and obey his unerring instructions.

"Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."—I Cor. 15:57

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# Making the Right Choice

*Key Verse: “The people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.”*  
—Joshua 24:24

*Selected Scripture:*  
*Joshua 24:1, 2, 14-22, 25*

lesson, Joshua first reminds the people of Israel that before God began dealing with their forefather, Abraham, their ancestors served other gods.—Josh. 24:2

He then recounts how God had been with them and delivered them out of the land of Egypt, and subsequently out of the hands of many enemies. “Ye went over Jordan, and came unto Jericho: and the men of Jericho fought against you, the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I [the Lord] delivered them into your hand.”—vs. 11

Joshua continues, by telling the people that now they must make a choice. They can either serve the gods of their ancestors before Abraham, the gods of their enemies, the gods of the Egyptians, or they can serve the Lord who delivered them from all these former conditions and brought them into a land flowing with milk and honey. To Joshua the choice was clear. He says, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (vs. 15) The people followed his advice, and also claimed the Lord as their God saying, “Therefore will we also serve the Lord; for he is our God.”—vs. 18

**OUR LIFE IS FULL OF** choices. Some seem of little importance, whereas others seem greater. Yet, altogether, the choices we make in each aspect of our daily lives go a long way in determining the direction of our life as a whole. Making the right choices in life isn’t always simple but it requires constant vigilance and effort on our part.

The account of Joshua calling all the tribes of Israel to Shechem is one about making correct and well-thought-out choices, and then abiding by them. In this

It is important to realize that when we make choices, especially concerning our relationship toward God, he expects us to abide by those choices, and to conduct ourselves in harmony with them. It was to this end that Joshua warned the Israelites about making their choice. He knew that they had failed to serve God in the past, and reminded them that to fail again after having made such a choice would bring severe punishment. He said: “If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good.”—vs. 20

Let us each be sure in choosing to serve the Lord that we do so with all our heart, mind, and being. Nor should we harbor any thoughts of serving other ‘gods’—such as malice, envy, strife, anger—or to serve any other of the fallen fleshly tendencies we formerly obeyed. As the Apostle Paul says, “Put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”—Eph. 4:22-24

May we be able to truly express the words contained in our *Key Verse*, ‘The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.’

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# Benjamin Goes to Egypt

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

**VERSES 1-14** “And the famine was sore in the land.

“And it came to pass, when they had eaten up the corn which they had brought out of Egypt, their father said unto them, Go again, buy us a little food.

“And Judah spake unto him, saying, The man did solemnly protest unto us, saying, Ye shall not see my face, except your brother be with you.

“If thou wilt send our brother with us, we will go down and buy thee food:

“But if thou wilt not send him, we will not go down: for the man said unto us, Ye shall not see my face, except your brother be with you.

“And Israel said, Wherefore dealt ye so ill with me, as to tell the man whether ye had yet a brother?

“And they said, The man asked us straitly of our state, and of our kindred, saying, Is your father yet alive? have ye another brother? and we told him according to the tenor of these words: could we certainly know that he would say, Bring your brother down?

“And Judah said unto Israel his father, Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go; that we may live, and not die, both we, and thou, and also our little ones.

“I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him: if I bring him not unto thee, and set him before thee, then let me bear the blame for ever:

“For except we had lingered, surely now we had returned this second time.

“And their father Israel said unto them, If it must be so now, do this; take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds:

“And take double money in your hand; and the money that was brought again in the mouth of your sacks, carry it again in your hand;

peradventure it was an oversight:

“Take also your brother, and arise, go again unto the man:

“And God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin. If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”

Time was against Jacob’s decision not to let Benjamin be taken to Egypt. The famine continued. The supply of corn which had been brought back from Egypt by his sons was rapidly dwindling and something had to be done, so he again asked them to make another trip into the land of the Pharaohs. In reply Judah was the spokesman, and he reminded his father that it simply could not be done unless they were permitted to take Benjamin with them. ‘If thou wilt not send him, we will not go,’ he said to his father.

Jacob was like most of us when faced with a difficult decision, for he was inclined to blame others. He asked his sons why they had dealt ‘so ill’ with him by revealing to Egypt’s food administrator that they had a younger brother at home, who had stayed behind with his father. But Joseph had put his brothers in a difficult position by accusing them of being spies, and they had been quite ready to tell the whole truth in order to clear themselves. They could not be blamed for telling the truth concerning their family. As they explained to their father, they were not aware of what the result would be. Jacob doubtless realized this, and after Judah offered himself as surety for the safe return of Benjamin, he yielded to the inevitable.

According to the custom of the time, he instructed that a present should be taken to the ‘man’ with whom they would have to deal in Egypt—‘a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds.’ This evidently was ‘fruit’ which had been stored before the famine, and possibly would be a rare treat in Egypt.

His instructions to take a double portion of money—that is, the amount that had been returned to them on the occasion of their first journey, and a supply sufficient to make the second purchase—is another evidence of Jacob’s caution. He explained concerning the returned money, ‘Perhaps it was an oversight.’ They were to be prepared as far as possible for any emergency that might arise.

After using his best judgment in his instructions to his sons, Jacob fell back on his sure tower of strength, saying, ‘God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin.’ Having thus committed the whole expedition into the Lord’s care, Jacob became resigned to whatever the Divine will might be in the matter. ‘If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved,’ he said. This should not be construed as a fatalistic attitude, but, as we have suggested, a humble resignation to whatever the Lord’s will might be in the matter. How little he realized then what a wonderful blessing the Lord had in store for him and for the entire family.

**VERSES 15-25** “And the men took that present, and they took double money in their hand, and Benjamin; and rose up, and went down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph.

“And when Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the ruler of his house, Bring these men home, and slay, and make ready; for these men shall dine with me at noon.

“And the man did as Joseph bade; and the man brought the men into Joseph’s house.

“And the men were afraid, because they were brought into Joseph’s house; and they said, Because of the money that was returned in our sacks at the first time are we brought in; that he may seek occasion against us, and fall upon us, and take us for bondmen, and our asses.

“And they came near to the steward of Joseph’s house, and they communed with him at the door of the house,

“And said, O sir, we came indeed down at the first time to buy food:

“And it came to pass, when we came to the inn, that we opened our sacks, and, behold, every man’s money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight: and we have brought it again in our hand.

“And other money have we brought down in our hands to buy food: we cannot tell who put our money in our sacks.

“And he said, Peace be to you, fear not: your God, and the God of your father, hath given you treasure in your sacks: I had your money. And he brought Simeon out unto them.

“And the man brought the men into Joseph’s house, and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their asses provender.

“And they made ready the present against Joseph came at noon: for they heard that they should eat bread there.”

Jacob's sons carried out his instructions, and when they arrived in Egypt they 'stood before Joseph.' When Joseph saw Benjamin with them he gave instructions to the 'ruler' of his house to take them into his home and to prepare dinner, explaining that he would be home to dine with them.

Again they became fearful, and little wonder. They had complied with the condition of bringing Benjamin back with them, and now the only thing they could think of to worry about was the money they had found in their sacks on the occasion of their former visit. Wishing to make sure that this would not be held against them, they made an opportunity to explain the situation to the steward of the house, hoping this would pave the way for a more favorable hearing in the matter.

They must have been greatly relieved when the steward said to them, 'Peace be to you, fear not: your God, and the God of your father, hath given you treasure in your sacks: I had your money.' Then he returned Simeon to them. Now they would know that they were not to be accused of stealing the money, that it had been put in their sacks because Joseph had ordered it so. But why he had done so remained unanswered.

The steward's reference to their God and to the God of their father, indicates that Joseph must have been 'witnessing' to his servants, and that this one, at least, had come to have a measure of faith in the God of Jacob. He had put the money in the sacks at the behest of Joseph, yet he explained that 'their God' had given them the treasure. This would indicate that Joseph had let it be known that Jacob's God was also his God, and that his action in this was on account of their worshipping the same God. He could make this point clear without telling his servants that Jacob was his father.

It was not a simple matter in those days to entertain a group of travelers, and yet when guests were welcome, they were taken care of well. The statement in verse 24 reminds us of how Abraham treated the three angels who appeared to him as he sat in the tent door on the plains of Mamre. See Genesis 18:4. It is also similar to the account given in Genesis 19:2 and 24:32. Providing water for feet washing, and feeding beasts of burden was evidently considered essential to proper entertainment of guests.

Joseph was a busy man. After granting his brethren a brief audience in the morning, he continued with his duties at the food administration headquarters, having arranged to meet them in his home for lunch. This gave them a little time. Being assured by the steward that the money incident would not be held against them, they then unpacked their ‘present,’ and prepared to give it to Joseph when he came in. They were leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to make a favorable impression on the one who literally held their lives in his hands.

**VERSES 26-34** “And when Joseph came home, they brought him the present which was in their hand into the house, and bowed themselves to him to the earth.

“And he asked them of their welfare, and said, Is your father well, the old man of whom ye spake? Is he yet alive?

“And they answered, Thy servant our father is in good health, he is yet alive. And they bowed down their heads, and made obeisance.

“And he lifted up his eyes, and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, Is this your younger brother, of whom ye spake unto me? And he said, God be gracious unto thee, my son.

“And Joseph made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there.

“And he washed his face, and went out, and refrained himself, and said, Set on bread.

“And they set on for him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, which did eat with him, by themselves: because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians.

“And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth: and the men marvelled one at another.

“And he took and sent messes unto them from before him: but Benjamin’s mess was five times so much as any of theirs. And they drank, and were merry with him.”

When Joseph came home, they gave him the present, and bowed down before him. Little did they realize that in doing this they were fulfilling the dreams of Joseph which led to their jealousy of him and their determination to get rid of the ‘daydreamer’ lest he one day attempt to

carry out his dream. Doubtless Joseph recalled his dreams, yet the realization of how they were being fulfilled did not arouse any feeling except sympathy and love for his brethren. Now he had an opportunity to serve his brethren, and like Jesus, of whom he was a type, he believed that the greatest among brethren should be the servant of all.

He inquired concerning the health of their father, and when he saw Benjamin he said, 'God be gracious unto thee, my son.' Suddenly he was overcome with emotion, and not wishing as yet to reveal his identity, he asked to be excused, and went off by himself to weep tears of joy in the realization that he was to be reunited with his family.

Joseph's conduct, however, was becoming more and more strange to his brethren; and no wonder! Why should they be treated so royally? When Joseph arranged them at the table, it was according to their ages. How did he know their ages? In apportioning the food, Benjamin was especially favored. Why? No wonder they 'marvelled one at another.' Nevertheless, they did not permit the strangeness of the situation to keep them from being properly friendly with their host. While they did not know what was behind this unusual treatment, they entered into the spirit of the occasion, evidently following the lead of Joseph and 'were merry with him.'

Perhaps by now, Joseph's brethren may have begun to think that this time they would procure a supply of food and return to Canaan without being placed in embarrassing circumstances. But God had further lessons for them to learn, as we shall see in our next study.

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*Dawn Bible Students Association*

# Thanksgiving

***Key Verse: “O give thanks unto the LORD; call upon his name: make known his deeds among the people.”—Psalm 105:1***

**EACH NOVEMBER IN THE** United States, a day of national thanksgiving has been set, as proclaimed by the President. Most churches will hold special services on that day, and there will be much feasting by those who can afford to feast. To millions it will be just another holiday with little or no thought given to being thankful, especially not to the Lord, for many are not sure that they believe in God.

But to Christians, dedicated to a sacrificial walk in the footsteps of their Master, Thanksgiving Day will be especially appreciated as another opportunity to pour out their thanks to their Heavenly Father for all that he continues to mean to them.

For those who are endeavoring to be faithful in following the Master, every day is one of thanksgiving to the Lord. Every day these are conscious of the many benefits they are constantly receiving from the bountiful hand of their Heavenly Father. They recall that by heredity they are members of a sin-cursed and dying race, and are not entitled through their own righteousness to enjoy God’s love, which provided a Redeemer in the person of his beloved Son, and that their imperfections are now covered by the merit of his shed blood.

We are thankful that the Lord has opened the eyes of our understanding to behold the beauties of his character as they are revealed through his great Divine plan of the ages. Through this understanding we are inspired to lay down our lives in his service, knowing that through his loving provision in Christ Jesus our imperfect works will be acceptable. (Rom. 12:1) While we have not made a bargain with the Lord to exchange earthly blessings for a heavenly reward, we are thankful for the “heavenly calling” which is extended to all those who, in the proper spirit and with understanding, respond to the call to walk in the Master’s footsteps.—Heb. 3:1

We know that the way in which we walk is narrow and difficult, and we are thankful for the many assurances of the Word that our Heavenly Father will guide and strengthen us in our every step; that he will never leave us, nor forsake us, nor permit us to be tested above that which we are able to bear. (See Hebrews 13:5 and I Corinthians 10:13) We are thankful that when we have been fully planted together with Jesus in his death—having proved faithful unto death, suffering and dying with him—we will live and reign with him. How blessed it will be when we reach the end of the way to receive the promised “crown of life”!—Rev. 2:10

We are thankful for the wonderful provision of restitution which our Heavenly Father has made for the world of mankind, and for the provision of the Divine plan that those who live and reign with Christ will have the privilege of dispensing these blessings to all the families of the earth. We are thankful that during the thousand years of the Messianic kingdom the knowledge of God’s glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, and that ultimately all will know the Lord, from the least unto the greatest. Then the whole world will give thanks unto the Lord for his goodness to the children of men. See Habakkuk 2:14 and Jeremiah 31:34.

## **HIS PRESENCE**

In Daniel 12:12 we are told of a time when a special blessing would come to the Lord’s people; to those, that is, who would be living at and beyond the close of “the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days.” Jesus associated his return with this blessing to be enjoyed by the faithful watchers, and indicates that the blessing would result from the fact that he would serve his people with “meat in due season.” (Matt. 24:45-47; Luke 12:37; Rev. 3:20) We have experienced this great blessing, and recognize that it is ours because our Lord has returned, and that now we are living in the time of his Second Presence. This surely is great cause for thankfulness.

What a blessing it is to recognize that we are living in this time. We rejoice in the ‘meat in due season’ which the Lord has served to us through his ‘faithful and wise servant.’ It is the precious truth of the Lord’s presence that explains the meaning of these chaotic times in which we are living. It is because we enjoy this knowledge that we do not fear

as the world fears, when we see the symbolic “earth” being “removed,” and the great “mountains [kingdoms]” being “carried into the midst of the” symbolic “sea.”—Ps. 46:1-3

Recognizing the Master’s presence gives us assurance that soon, as the “Sun of Righteousness,” he will arise “with healing in his wings” for the promised blessing of all the families of the earth. (Mal. 4:2; Gen. 26:4) Jesus, together with his church, shall “shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Matt. 13:43) How thankful we are that the poor, suffering world is to have its diseases healed and its problems solved. As we consider the sick, the suffering, the dying, our hearts say: ‘Thank God for “the times of restitution of all things” now so near!’—Acts 3:19,21

## TELLING OTHERS

Our *Key Verse* admonishes us to ‘make known’ the Lord’s ‘deeds among the people.’ This, indeed, is the true way of showing our appreciation to the Lord for all his loving goodness to us. If a friend bestows great favors upon us, our first inclination is to tell others how kind he has been, and what a grand person he is. The same should be true concerning the manifold blessings which our Heavenly Father has bestowed upon us. We just naturally want ‘to make known his deeds among the people.’

What are the Lord’s ‘deeds’? There are, of course, his marvelous works of Creation. These are on display for all to see and appreciate if they will. The ‘deeds’ of the Lord which are not widely known are those contained in his great plan of the ages; namely, the plans he is carrying out for the redemption and recovery of the human race from sin and death. To make known these ‘deeds’ of the Lord is to bear witness to the Truth, the Gospel of the kingdom.

It is a glorious privilege to tell the whole world these good tidings of the kingdom! Bearing witness to the Truth is, in itself, showing forth the praises of him who has “called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (I Pet. 2:9) We thank him for the privilege he has given us of bearing witness to his Truth. We should love to tell the story; and as we do so in the true spirit of love and thanksgiving, we will find that each time we tell it, the story of God’s plan of salvation becomes “more wonderfully sweet.”—“*Hymns of Dawn*” #116

Bearing witness to the Truth is something in which we all can have a part. Not all of us can have a large part, but each one can do something. Bearing testimony personally to our friends and neighbors is by far the most effective method of sounding forth the glad tidings. How our hearts rejoice as we engage in this personal work! True, we may not, due to circumstances, have many opportunities along this line. But perhaps there would be more opportunities if we were on the alert to watch for them. For some it might be possible to set aside a little time each week just to call on people in the vicinity in which we live, and tell them about the glad tidings of the kingdom, leaving some literature where it seems timely to do so. Truly this would be one way of giving thanks to the Lord for all that he has done for us.

We are thankful to the Lord that he has provided his people with tracts and kingdom cards, which we can distribute to our neighbors, hand to people we meet, or to leave where they can be found in public places. One of our hymns refers to tracts as ‘golden gems,’ and they truly are gems of truth—brief and to the point—and through the years have been instrumental in attracting many to a more complete message of the kingdom.

Many of the Lord’s people at this Thanksgiving time will want to praise the Lord for the privilege they have enjoyed of mailing the “*Hope*” booklets to friends and relatives of the deceased. We all thank the Lord for opening this opportunity to make known the glad tidings. Letters of appreciation frequently come to *The Dawn* from those who receive the “*Hope*” booklets, testifying that they have been comforted through a better understanding of the hope of the resurrection.

## **RADIO AND TELEVISION**

We believe that the Lord’s people are thankful that the message of the kingdom continues to go out so widely over the radio and television. There is no doubt that this is made possible by means of the Lord’s overruling providences in connection with the consecrated efforts of his people to make known his ‘deeds’ among the people. We are constantly hearing from those whose first contact with the true Gospel of Christ has been through the radio or television. The Lord is blessing this work, and this is one of our great causes for thankfulness as we approach the third millennium since Christ.

As we have previously reported from time to time, “*The Bible Answers*” video cassettes used on television are also having a wide use in the public meeting field. This is another special cause for thankfulness, and is a method of service to which we had not given special consideration in advance. During the year, the witness has been given in many churches and clubs, and the brethren around the country have used one or more of the video cassettes in their public efforts. Again we say that the Lord is good to his people in allowing them this further opportunity for service.

## **CONVENTIONS AND CLASS MEETINGS**

Throughout the year there have been many conventions, both large and small. Each one of these has been a cause for thankfulness to all who could attend. How blessed it is to meet together for one or more days with those of ‘like precious faith’! The same is true of the regularly scheduled ecclesia meetings. Those who are situated so they can attend these meetings have great cause for thankfulness. We know that the Lord’s people in general are giving earnest heed to Paul’s admonition not to forsake “the assembling of” themselves “together,” and “so much the more,” as they see “the day approaching.”—Heb. 10:25

To have the privilege of fellowship with a few or many of the Lord’s saints is a blessed thing. It is part of the rich heritage of the consecrated which they enjoy while this side of the veil, and an outstanding cause for thankfulness. The Apostle Paul expressed himself along this line, saying, “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, For your fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now.” (Phil. 1:3-5) Let us endeavor to cultivate a deeper affinity for our brethren in Christ everywhere.

## **PRAYER**

We thank God always for the privilege of prayer—of approaching the throne of heavenly grace, there to “obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. 4:16) Indeed, prayers of thanksgiving should be overflowing from our hearts at all times. We thank God for himself, and his beloved Son. We thank him for the Holy Spirit which reached us through his precious Word of truth. How wonderful it is to have the Bible,

and through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to be able to understand it.

In addition to prayers of thanksgiving we also have that blessed privilege of seeking, through prayer, the Lord's forgiveness of our many imperfections. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," Jesus taught us to pray. (Matt. 6:12) How soon a cloud would hide the smile of our Father should we neglect this aspect of prayer!

We need to pray for guidance, and for help to do the Lord's will. We should not attempt to carry out the terms of our consecration in our own wisdom or strength. True, the Lord knows what we need before we ask; but he wants us to ask, thus to be the more impressed with our need to put our trust in him. And how truly thankful we are for the assurance that when we go to God in prayer, through the merit of our dear Redeemer we will be heard.

## **IN EVERYTHING**

Paul wrote, "Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." (I Thess. 5:17,18) This does not mean that we are to be on our knees in prayer every minute of the day and night. It does mean that we are to be habitual in prayer, and never give up this blessed privilege of communing with our Heavenly Father. And in the matter of thanksgiving, it means that every day is to be Thanksgiving Day to the Christian. As we have seen, it is not enough to set aside one day each year to offer up the sacrifice of praise to our Heavenly Father for all his many benefits to us. And truly, the Lord's benefits are many. David wrote, "Many, O Lord my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: ... if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered."—Ps. 40:5

The Lord's 'works' and 'deeds' are many. Just as David wrote, if we undertake to recall them all we find that they are more than can be numbered. As we contemplate his many benefits we are lost in wonder, love, and praise, and we ask what shall we render unto the Lord for all his goodness. The answer comes back from his Word: "I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all his people."—Ps. 116:13,14

Thus we are reminded that true thanksgiving to the Lord for all he has done for us is not mere lip service. It is appropriate—indeed essential—that we express our thanksgiving to the Lord with our lips, and from the heart. And if this is genuine, it will be verified by our works in doing the will of the Lord, which is the paying of our vows of consecration to lay down our lives in his service.

Does the special Thanksgiving Day of 1999 find us faithfully pressing on in the way of sacrifice, doing with our might what our hands find to do? If so, it is because every day our hearts overflow with praise to the great Giver of every good and perfect gift, and that this praise is finding expression in our determination to give our hearts and our all to the God of our salvation.

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***Dawn Bible Students Association***

# God's Covenants

**GOD HAS REVEALED** his loving plan of salvation through covenants made with his people. However, the word 'covenant' is not in such general use today as it was in the past; the words 'agreement' and 'contract' are more frequently employed instead. Also, the word 'promise' is closely related to the word 'covenant.' God promised to do certain things, and these promises constitute covenants, or agreements. The promises of God to reconcile the world to himself through Christ are unconditional, while the promises to those being selected as members of the church class are conditional.

A covenant pledges that agreement and harmony can be expected between those parties who enter into it. Before his transgression Adam was in covenant relationship with God. And concerning Israel's disobedience, the Prophet Hosea wrote that "they like men (*Marginal Translation: 'Adam'*) have transgressed the covenant."—Hos. 6:7

The simple but exacting terms of Adam's covenant with God are partially set forth in Genesis 2:15-17. They called for Adam's obedience—obedience based upon the simple test of not partaking of the fruit "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Thus, Adam's part in this covenant was to obey God. Clearly implied in the record is God's promise to bless Adam with a happy and continuous life, had Adam remained obedient to God. The beautiful harmony which existed between Adam and his Creator would have continued had he remained faithful to his portion of the covenant.

As the Prophet Hosea wrote, Adam was not faithful to his part of that original covenant, but instead, he 'transgressed the covenant.' This meant that instead of continuing in a friendly relationship with God, Adam was alienated from his Creator. God's disfavor was manifested in his pronouncement of the sentence of death upon him, including casting him out of the Garden of Eden into the unfinished earth to die. (Ps. 30:5) Adam's transgression affected his entire progeny, since they all came under the same manifestation of disfavor. Paul explains this in I Corinthians 15:21,22: "Since by man came death, by man came also the

resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

While God was no longer in covenant relationship with his earthly creatures as a whole, from time to time he made covenants with certain individuals. Those chosen ones, through their faith and obedience, were pleasing to him. The first one of these mentioned in the Bible is Noah. He had demonstrated his faith in God by obedience in building the ark in preparation for the Flood. Noah’s family held the same trust in God, and therefore later shared in the covenant which God made with that man of faith.

God’s covenant with Noah, made after the Flood, promised that all flesh would never again be destroyed by the waters of a flood. The covenant reads: “God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you; of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth. And I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.”—Gen. 9:8-11

This was a very important covenant in God’s plan for the recovery of the human race from sin and death. While the promise assured Noah and his family that the human race would not be destroyed by water, his plan for man was that he was to multiply and to fill the earth. The command to do this was first given to Adam (Gen. 1:26,28), and later repeated to Noah and his family. God created the earth to be man’s home, and we can rest assured that neither the earth, nor the human race living upon it, nor the beasts of the earth, will ever be destroyed.—Isa. 45:18

The fulfillment of God’s promises relative to the redemption and recovery of his earthly creatures from sin and death calls for a resurrection of the dead. This means that all the pure Adamic stock who died in Noah’s Flood did not perish forever. God’s covenant with Noah and his family is a wonderful reminder that God created man to live, not to be destroyed. And through his other covenants with mankind, God’s great love for his human creatures continues to be revealed.—John 3:16; 5:28,29

## **COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM**

A few hundred years after the Flood, God made a covenant with Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham: “I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.” (Gen. 12:2,3) Two points are mentioned in this promise. One is that the descendants of Abraham would become a great nation; and the other is that in him ‘all families of the earth’ would be blessed.

This promise was reiterated to Abraham several times—the last reference to it being in Genesis 22:1-18. God was testing Abraham’s faith. Isaac, his son—the promised seed—had been born to Abraham and Sarah when they were old. He was truly a ‘miracle child.’ When Isaac was grown, God commanded Abraham to offer this ‘miracle child’ in sacrifice. This was indeed a most severe test of Abraham’s faith, but he demonstrated his willingness to obey God’s command.

In the New Testament it is revealed that Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead although he was sacrificed as a burnt offering. (Heb. 11:17-19) Abraham demonstrated his complete faith in God by placing Isaac on an altar stacked with wood, prepared for offering him as a burnt offering. Abraham stretched forth his hand to slay his son Isaac with a knife; but his hand was stayed by an angel. The angel directed Abraham to lift up his eyes and see “a ram caught in a thicket” which he told him to offer “in the stead of his son.”—Gen. 22:2-13

God was pleased with Abraham because of this marvelous demonstration of faith. He said: “By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”—Gen. 22:16-18

## **NEW TESTAMENT EXPLANATION**

Turning to the New Testament, we read, “The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the Gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.” (Gal. 3:8)

The 16th verse of the chapter reads, “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” From this it is clear that when God promised Abraham that his ‘seed’ would bless all the families of the earth, the one he had chiefly in mind as the blesser of the people was Jesus, the Christ of the New Testament, and the Messiah of the Old.

The apostle gives us further information concerning the ‘seed’ of promise. Addressing Christians he adds, “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. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:27-29

The faithful followers of Jesus during the Gospel Age are the children of the covenant which God made with Abraham. Paul states, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.” (Gal. 4:28) In Hebrews 6:13-20, the Apostle Paul again associates the followers of Jesus with God’s oathbound covenant with Abraham. We quote:

“When God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.” How very closely Paul associates the Gospel church with the Abrahamic Covenant!

## **THE LAW COVENANT**

Following the Exodus, God entered into a covenant with the natural descendants of Abraham. We speak of this as the Law Covenant because it was based upon an expression of God’s Law as epitomized by the Ten Commandments. Moses served as mediator between God and the

Israelites in the making of this covenant. In the Early Church there were some differences of opinion as to whether or not the followers of Jesus were bound by the terms of the Law Covenant.

Paul explained the truth on this matter, saying that the Law was “added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the [original] promise was made.” (Gal. 3:19) And again, “The Law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” (vs. 24) It is obvious from these statements, that Christians are not under the Law Covenant, although they certainly are in harmony with all its righteous requirements.

For the natural descendants of Abraham, however, the Law Covenant served a good purpose. First, as Paul explains, ‘it was added because of transgressions till the [promised] seed should come.’ God knew that it would be many centuries before his due time for bringing forth the true, ‘faith seed’ of Abraham. It was in his plan that the Head of this ‘faith seed’ should come from the nation of Israel. But because of the sins of this people it was most likely that before the due time came for the Messiah to appear, the nation would wander completely away from God. The Law Covenant served as a deterrent to this trend. While the Israelites were not faithful in keeping the Law, it did hold them in check sufficiently, so that there remained a small nation of Israelites into which Jesus was born, and to whom he presented himself as Messiah.

Paul further explains that the Law Covenant was a ‘schoolmaster’ to bring us to Christ; that is, it demonstrated the need for a Redeemer. Paul wrote, “Death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression.” (Rom. 5:14) Adam’s transgression was willful. Had he elected to do so, he could have refrained from partaking of the forbidden fruit which brought the sentence of death upon himself.

Adam’s progeny came under condemnation to death through him, and not because of individual willful sins of their own. Or, as Paul states, these died although they ‘had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression.’ This situation continued, Paul explains, until Moses—referring to the time of the giving of the Law. It was then, in the case of the one small nation of Israel, that a change took place.

This change was brought about through the Law Covenant. This was a covenant in which God promised the Israelites that if they would keep his Law they would live. “The man which doeth those things shall live by them.” (Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12; Lev. 18:5) This meant that any Jew who lived up to the terms of the Law Covenant perfectly would no longer need to die because of Adam’s transgression. When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life, Jesus referred him to the Law, as summed up in the Ten Commandments.—Matt. 19:16-20; Luke 18:18-27

This young man realized that he was not gaining life by keeping the Law, although doubtless he had been making a sincere effort to do so. The reason for his failure is the fact that no imperfect, fallen human being can measure up to the perfect standard of the Divine Law. He realized that, like all others, he was on the way to death. This failure to gain life by keeping the Law had caused this young man to seek life through other channels, and therefore he went to Jesus.

The rich young ruler was not ready to meet the terms of discipleship, so he did not learn the manner in which he could receive life through Jesus. But he had learned that he could not gain life by keeping the Law. So it is, as explained by Paul, that the Law served as a schoolmaster, a teacher and leader, to emphasize the need for Christ, and the provision which God has made through him to give life to all who lost life through Adam. Not many of the Jewish nation have as yet learned this lesson. Indeed, very few Gentiles have learned it. But before the plan of God shall have accomplished its full purpose, all will be fully enlightened, and only those who willfully turn against this light will fail to gain everlasting life.

## **AN ALLEGORY**

In Galatians 4:22-26, Paul presents the further aspects of both the Abrahamic Covenant and the Law Covenant of Israel. We quote: “It is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with

her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.” The ‘Jerusalem’ which is ‘the mother of us all’ (all true Christians), was represented by Sarah, the ‘freewoman.’ Thus Paul refuted the argument of Christians in his day who desired to be in bondage to the Law Covenant.

Since Hagar as a bondwoman represented the Law Covenant, her son, Ishmael, represented the nation of Israel in bondage to the Law. The Apostle Paul quotes from the 54th chapter of Isaiah, a prophecy concerning that phase of the Abrahamic Covenant for developing the Isaac class, or the church. This prophecy is particularly noteworthy because it refers to the development of children under the seemingly impossible conditions of the Grace Covenant. It is properly called the ‘Grace Covenant’ because it is made by grace with the footstep followers of Christ. In the matter of time, it follows the Law Covenant. So also, Sarah did not give birth to Isaac until after Hagar had given birth to Ishmael.

The children of this covenant are most unusual. They are developed miraculously and are taught directly by their Father, the God of heaven and earth. Jesus referred to this prophecy in John 6:44,45, where he said, “No man can come to me, except the Father ... draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God.” (Isa. 54:13) The prophecy stresses the endurance of the Grace Covenant.

## **THE NEW COVENANT**

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, another of God’s covenants is brought to our attention. It is referred to as a ‘new’ covenant, and the promise is that it will be made ‘with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.’ We quote: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord.”

In what sense was this a ‘new’ covenant? The implication is strong that, as a ‘new’ covenant it should replace one of the ‘old’ covenants. Should it replace the covenant with Adam? In one sense it could be said

to do so. Should it replace the covenant with Noah? Assuredly not. God does not intend to destroy all life upon earth again, despite the opinion of some Christians to the contrary. Should it replace the Abrahamic Covenant? Not at all. All families of earth will be blessed by the promised seed, developed under the ‘Sarah feature’ of the Abrahamic Covenant. Should it replace the Law Covenant of Israel? Yes. That is why the New Covenant should be called the ‘New Law Covenant,’ which, when in effect, will write God’s law upon people’s hearts, instead of “in tables of stone.”—II Cor. 3:3

God’s promises are sure. His covenants are true. His ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts.—Isa. 55:8

How great is our God!

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*Dawn Bible Students Association*

## Keeping Our “First Love”

**ALTHOUGH ONE MAY HAVE** started out in their Christian life with enthusiasm and zeal, a drowsiness may adversely affect their progress along the narrow way. Even one’s love for the Lord and his Word and his will, or love for one another in the faith, might become cool. What the Scriptures refer to as our “first love” (Rev. 2:4), should be maintained at all costs.

In Matthew 24:12, apparently pointing particularly to our day, Jesus declares: “Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.” Iniquity includes inequity, injustice, unrighteousness. Therefore this verse might properly read: ‘Because unrighteousness shall abound, the love of many shall grow cold.’ The church of Christ is now living in a time of particular testing when we should be especially on guard. Our love—our ‘first love’—must not be allowed to grow cold despite the fact that ‘unrighteousness’ abounds.

There is a solemn warning addressed to the church at Ephesus, which reads: “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent.”—Rev. 2:2-5

As stated, the brethren in the church at Ephesus labored and were patient, and could not bear evil. There appeared to be faithfulness and firmness in discipline; cheerfulness in bearing any burden; and a just hatred of deeds and practices which Christ also hates. Can it be possible to possess all these qualities and yet be lacking an essential quality? ‘Thou hast left thy first love.’ As God’s consecrated children, surely we can each vividly call to mind incidents concerning our ‘first love,’ and how eager we were to carry out the Heavenly Father’s will respecting holy matters.

The question arises: Is our ‘first love’ for the Lord—for his holy Word and will—being retained? Are we complying with I Peter 1:22 respecting our sincere “love of the brethren,” and loving “one another with a pure heart fervently”? Is our earnest desire in harmony with I Thessalonians 3:12: “to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all”?

The warning message of the Revelator to the Ephesians is very grave. By way of contrast it can be noted that the Apostle Paul, when writing to the Thessalonians, spoke words of commendation to the brethren of that congregation: “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers: Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”—I Thess. 1:2,3

It is important to note that in the message of the Revelator to Ephesus, their ‘works,’ ‘labour,’ and ‘patience,’ are mentioned, but nothing is said regarding their ‘faith,’ ‘love,’ or ‘hope.’ Evidently these qualities were not *in connection with* their works. In contrast, the church at Thessalonica was commended for these attributes, because the brethren there were actively engaged in their works *as a result of* their faith and love and hope.

There were ‘works, and ... labour’ in Ephesus (Rev. 2:2), but the Revelator does not say ‘works of faith!’ He continues, “For my [Christ’s] name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted;” but again, the Revelator does not say, ‘Your labour of love!’ How very tragic! If love is lacking, mere increased labor, even for Christ’s name’s sake, cannot make up for that deficiency.

Patience was evident in Ephesus, but the Revelator does not say, ‘patience of hope!’ Instead we read, “Thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent.” (vss. 4,5) Unfaithfulness of heart is very serious. The church is to be absorbed in her Lord, and his mission; living *in* him; living *for* him; bound to him by an increasing bond of love.

‘Thou hast left thy first love.’ What a dishonor to our Heavenly Father and to his beloved Son! It is as if—after acquaintance with our gracious Father and his Son, and the stupendous, sublime, Divine, eternal purpose of God in Christ Jesus, and the Divine will concerning them—brethren

were finding these revelations less important in their hearts and lives than earthly things.

Our ‘first love,’ which is to be maintained, is indeed a love which is active—it labors in harmony with our faith. Faith, of course, we must have, for it is vital. According to II Peter 1:5-7, love is that supreme quality which must be added to our faith. And I Corinthians 13:2 reads: “Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [love], I am nothing.” We are to be *lovingly* obedient to God and his holy Word and will, in which our faith is centered. Ours is to be a living faith, energized by love.

In the case of faithful Abraham, his loving obedience to God was in harmony with his faith. Actions were added—indeed, there was cooperation between his faith and his works. We read “Thou seest that the faith cooperated with his works; and that the faith was made complete by the works... As the body without breath is dead, so also the faith, without works, is dead.”—James 2:22,26, *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott*

In Galations 5:6 (*WED*), we see that what avails us in Christ Jesus is “faith operating in us by love.” It is very important indeed that we “consider one another to provoke [arouse, incite, stimulate] unto love.” (Heb. 10:24) We are not to be reckless regarding one another’s interests, but at all times to consider [“perceive thoughtfully, with the mind,” *Young’s Analytical Concordance*] what would be helps, and what would be hindrances—what would be encouragements, and what would be stumblingblocks—to our brethren. We are to do all in our power to assist one another to “run with patience the race that is set before us.” (Heb. 12:1) If truly consecrated to the Lord, we should do nothing to discourage the brethren in the truth, but every effort must be for encouragement in the truth.—II Cor. 13:8

Every Christian should be a burning and shining light; and his every word and act considered and shaped for the benefit of those with whom he comes into contact! What a blessing this would be in the home and in the ecclesia! This brotherly consideration is what the Lord is urging upon us through his Word; we should, so far as possible, avoid every word and act that might incite to hatred, envy, strife, bitterness, and works corresponding to these feelings—all of which are of the flesh and of the devil.—James 3:15

Associated with the exhortation to incite ‘unto love and to good works,’ is the instruction to forsake not “the assembling” of ourselves “together.” (Heb. 10:25) None of us is so strong in the new spiritual nature that we can forego the fellowship of kindred minds. But even if we did feel sufficiently strong by the Lord’s grace, the spirit of love in us should be in such control that we would delight to meet with the brethren for their sakes.

We, as Christians walking in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus, are like coals of fire which, if separated, will tend to cool rapidly; but which, if brought together, the entire mass will tend to increase in glowing fervency.

Thus, like the glowing coals, we will be helped to maintain the fervency of our ‘first love.’

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