

The City of God

***“By faith he
[Abraham]
sojourned in the
land of promise, as
in a strange
country, dwelling
in tabernacles with
Isaac and Jacob,
the heirs with him
of the same
promise: For he
looked for a city
which hath
foundations, whose
builder and
maker is God.”
—Hebrews 11:9,10***

THE FIRST RECORD WE

have in the Bible indicating that God’s purpose toward humanity would be carried out through a “seed” is the statement he made to the serpent in the Garden of Eden, that the seed of the “woman” would “bruise,” or crush, its head. (Gen. 3:15) Various statements in the New Testament reveal that this foretold “bruising” is to be accomplished by Christ and his faithful followers when exalted to glory, and reigning

in the Messianic kingdom.—Rom. 16:20; Rev. 20:1-4

In the gradual unfolding of God’s plan, a more meaningful promise was made by him to Abraham, formerly called Abram. Jehovah told him that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. This promise of blessing was first made to Abraham while he lived in Ur of the Chaldees. It reads, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew

thee: And 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. 12:1-3

After Abraham had entered the land of Canaan, the Lord said to him, “Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.”—Gen 13:14-16

Later, after Abraham had demonstrated his faithfulness by showing his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering, God confirmed his promise to him by an oath. This promise concerning the “seed” and the blessing of all the families of the earth is often referred to as God’s oath-bound covenant. (Gen. 22:15-18) In this statement of the covenant, a further item was added which reads, “Thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies.”

In the various foregoing statements of this covenant, a number of points may be noted. There was to be a seed of blessing; all families of the earth were to be blessed; the land of Canaan was promised to Abraham and his descendants; and his seed was to possess the gate of his enemies. In examining these various aspects of the covenant as they are touched upon throughout the Scriptures, it becomes apparent that the entire plan of God for human redemption and salvation is thus foretold.

ABRAHAM LOOKED FOR A CITY

Our opening text informs us that Abraham journeyed in the land of promise, as in a strange country, lodging in temporary dwellings, looking for a permanent home, a “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Abraham originally lived in the city of Ur, and apparently had been prosperous. He subsequently lived in tents, or “tabernacles.” This was not because he had suddenly become poor and could not afford a better home, but rather, he was waiting for God to build a city for him, one which he could occupy in keeping with his understanding of the covenant of promise which Jehovah had given to him.

Cities in Abraham’s time were not like the cities of today. Usually they were small, and often surrounded by a wall. In many instances they were composed of people who were largely members of one family, or tribe, with a responsible head of the family as the ruler. The people of Ur were, for the most part, worshipers of heathen gods, and Abraham found himself almost alone in his worship of the true and living God. In this position he would have little influence in the government of the city.

God, however, had promised that Abraham was to have a seed, or offspring, of his own. This seed would exercise authority and power, as implied in the statement, “Thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies.” Abraham perhaps visualized his family becoming large and powerful, with its strength concentrated in a “city,” which eventually would extend its sphere of influence over other families and cities, and beneficently extend God’s promised blessings to them. We know, of course, that Abraham’s

understanding, in whatever conclusions he may have reached concerning the meaning of God's covenant, came far short of the reality. Ultimately, he "died in faith," not having received the fulfillment of God's promise.—Heb. 11:13,39

A city is used in the Bible to symbolize a government, or kingdom. Nineveh, Babylon, and other great cities of the past were viewed as governmental centers. The same was true of the city of Jerusalem, and particularly Mount Zion in Jerusalem. It is not to be supposed that Abraham could possibly realize all the implications of the promise which God made to him. However, the fact that he "looked for a city" suggests that he understood Jehovah's promise to him meant that one day God would set up a governmental arrangement that would bless all the families of the earth, and that his seed would be used in some manner by the Lord in this government.

Isaac and Jacob also had great faith in the promises made to Abraham. On his deathbed Jacob prophesied that "Shiloh," meaning "peaceful one," would arise in the family of his son Judah, and that "unto him shall the gathering of the people be." Jacob foretold that "the sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come." (Gen. 49:10) This prophetic language implied the coming of a great ruler as the seed of Abraham.

Hundreds of years later this royal line of promise through the tribe of Judah was narrowed to the family of David. The Lord said to him, "Thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever." (II Sam. 7:16) In response to this promise, David said

to God, “Thou hast spoken also of thy servant’s house for a great while to come.”—vs. 19

David came closer to being right than he realized in making this remark, for hundreds of years later the angel Gabriel revealed that the real heir of David’s throne was Christ. He said to Mary, “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.”—Luke 1:32,33

OBEDIENCE AND FAITH REQUIRED

In the New Testament we find the requirement of obedience emphasized in connection with the promised seed. This was also expressed with regard to the promise made to Abraham when God said that his worthiness to receive it was “because thou hast obeyed my voice.” (Gen. 22:18) The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, who were natural descendants of Abraham, were informed by Jesus that they were not in reality the children of Abraham, because they did not obey the teachings of God and the righteous principles of the Mosaic Law.—John 7:19-24; 8:39,44

Paul also emphasized that simply being a natural descendant of Abraham did not in itself constitute one a part of his seed of promise. “I could wish,” Paul wrote, “that myself were accursed [margin: separated] from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers,

and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen. Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”—Rom. 9:3-8

In this statement Paul reveals that the true seed of Abraham are also “children of God.” This agrees with John 1:11,12, where we read that Jesus came to his own according to the flesh, the natural seed of Abraham. However, the majority of “his own received him not.” John explains, though, that those who did receive Jesus, by faith in his redemptive sacrifice, were given the power, right or authority, “to become the sons of God.” Thus, through obedience and faith, they became a part of the true seed of Abraham.

Another interesting truth comes to light in the New Testament concerning the seed of Abraham, which is that believing Gentiles as well as Israelites are considered to be a part of the seed class. As Paul explains the matter, nationalities do not enter into it at all. He states: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:26-29, *New International Version*

CHILDREN OF GOD

Thus does Paul explain clearly that the children of God of this age are also the seed of Abraham—that seed through which all the families of the earth are to be blessed. Jesus is the chief of this seed class. (Gal. 3:16) He is the Head over what Paul describes as his house: “But Christ as a son over his own house; which house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.”—Heb. 3:6

Here the word “house” carries the same connotation as when the Bible speaks of “the house of David.” It is a royal, or ruling house, in which every consecrated follower of the Master can be a member if they “hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope” unto the end of their earthly course. Indeed, the followers of the Master are called upon to be faithful even unto death, and only upon this basis will they be rewarded with “the crown of life.”—Rev. 2:10

Paul wrote, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” (Rom. 8:16,17) The words “heirs” and “joint-heirs” as used here by the apostle pertain to the throne, or kingdom of Christ, the greater fulfillment of David’s kingdom. Paul explained further concerning the prospect of sharing in the work of Christ’s kingdom, “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him.”—II Tim. 2:11,12

In Hebrews 12:22 the Apostle Paul associates the hope of the children of God, the faith seed of Abraham,

with “mount Sion,” and “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Based on the promises made to him Abraham looked for this city of God, but he did not comprehend the full truth concerning it. However, Abraham had faith to believe that through his seed God would at some future time establish rulership over the earth by means of a kingdom of justice and righteousness which would result in all the families of the earth being blessed.

MOUNT ZION

David established his government on Mount Zion, which was a part of the literal earthly Jerusalem of his day. In harmony with this, the Bible shows those who constitute the greater ruling house of David as being in “mount Sion” [Greek spelling]. The Apostle John wrote, “I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father’s name written in their foreheads.”—Rev. 14:1

The “Lamb” of God is Jesus, this symbolism being used to remind us that it was first necessary for him to suffer and die as man’s Redeemer before he could rule from symbolic “mount Sion.” (Isa. 53:7; John 1:29; Rev. 13:8) Those who are shown with the Lamb on Mount Sion, John further wrote, “are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.” (Rev. 14:4) There is no other way to be on Mount Sion with the Lamb, to live and reign with him, than to follow him by walking in his footsteps of sacrifice and service, faithfully unto death.

The present Gospel Age is the period set aside in the plan of God for the calling and preparation of those who will be on Mount Sion with the Lamb, to

share in the rulership of his kingdom. Peter testified that “God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name;” that is, the people who have the Heavenly Father’s name “written in their foreheads,” and who one day will be the “bride,” the “wife” of the Lamb.—Acts 15:14; Rev. 19:7; 21:2

These are partakers of a “heavenly calling.” (Heb. 3:1) Their hope is to be with Jesus, who promised to his faithful followers, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:2,3) The Apostle John also wrote, “It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”—I John 3:2

A SPIRITUAL PRIESTHOOD

Those who partake of the heavenly calling, and eventually will be with Jesus in glory to live and reign with him as the greater house of David, must offer themselves fully to God in service and sacrifice for the divine cause. The Apostle Peter wrote, “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up ... sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people [Greek: God’s special possession]; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”—I Pet. 2:5,9,10

Peter's observation that those to whom he wrote had not in the past been God's people is in keeping with the divine arrangement that Gentiles, by their faith and obedience, could qualify to be the children of God, and members of his ruling house of sons. In the verses just preceding, Peter speaks of those who were "disobedient" and had rejected Jesus, "the chief corner stone" which God had laid in Sion.—I Pet. 2:6-8

Peter's words are a reference to the prophecy of Psalm 118:22,23. Jesus also quoted from this prophecy, and declared that because of the unfaithfulness of Israel as a nation in failing to accept him, the "kingdom of God" would be taken from them and "given to a nation bringing forth the fruits" of righteousness. (Matt. 21:42,43) Thus, Peter's reference to this in connection with his statement, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation," is a positive identification of the "nation" to which the kingdom of God was given when taken away from the nation of Israel.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly, however, that faithfulness and obedience to the Lord is the condition upon which anyone may hope to be a member of this new nation to which the privileges of rulership in the kingdom of God are given. This holy nation, this ruling nation, is made up of faithful individuals, beginning with Jesus, its Head. Many proved worthy of this exalted position as members of the royal seed of Abraham during the period of the Early Church. There have been some in each generation since. There are still those in the world today who are earnestly endeavoring to make their "calling and election sure" to a place in the future ruling nation.—II Pet. 1:10

Only when all the individuals comprising this holy nation have proven faithful, will it be brought together as a ruling house. This takes place at the end, or harvest, of the present age. (Matt. 13:39,43, *NIV*) The assembling of all the faithful individuals is made possible through the resurrection of the dead—the “first resurrection” of those who will live and reign with Christ a thousand years.—Rev. 20:6

Then, under Christ, and as the ruling seed of Abraham, this kingdom class will make up that “city” for which Abraham looked, the city whose “builder and maker is God.” It is that “holy city, New Jerusalem,” which John in his vision saw “coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev. 21:2) This holy city is the ruling seed of Abraham which will fulfill God’s promise to bless “all the families of the earth.”

Concerning this John wrote: “I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.” (Rev. 21:3-5) Could we have a better description of divine blessings being dispensed to all the families of the earth? Truly, God has made it crystal clear as to the extent to which the ruling seed of Abraham will bless all the families of the earth.

God promised Abraham that his seed would “possess the gate of his enemies,” meaning to subdue and control them. The ultimate and complete fulfillment of this promise is described by the Apostle Paul. He wrote that Christ, the Head of the ruling seed of Abraham, must reign until all enemies are put under his feet, and that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. (I Cor. 15:25,26) It was not possible for Abraham to visualize this glorious fulfillment of God’s oath-bound promise, but how he will rejoice when he comes to a realization of God’s wonderful provision for all mankind!

John further wrote of this holy city, “The nations ... shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”—Rev. 21:24-27

Here the city of God is shown functioning as a government, with its subjects being drawn into its environs and being blessed. Even though the city is founded in heaven, its subjects are upon the earth, and in order to receive the blessings as such they must be purified, and wholeheartedly accept the rulership of the holy city over their lives. Assuredly, this is a bright prospect for the dying world of mankind, which so much needs the favor and blessing of our loving God! ■