

God's Covenants

“The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.”

—Psalm 25:14

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, the Hebrew word translated “covenant” means a solemn compact, or agreement. Its Greek equivalent in the New Testament is also translated

“covenant” and sometimes “testament.” These words are not in themselves biblical doctrines, nor are they used exclusively in the Scriptures to describe God’s attitude toward, or relationship with, his people. However, when they are used with respect to God and his human creation, they convey the idea of being in harmony with him, in contrast to being alienated from him.

Addressing Ephraim and Judah through the Prophet Hosea, the Lord said, “They like Adam have transgressed the covenant.” (Hos. 6:7, *American Standard Version*) From this it is evident that God considered himself in covenant relationship, or agreement, with Adam. The reasons for this are obvious. Adam had been created in the image of God. His whole being would naturally be in harmony with God. Knowing and doing God’s will would be the joy of his life.—Gen. 1:26,27

There were certain details of the divine instructions which needed to be spelled out for Adam. As a test of his obedience, God placed a restriction on his freedom. He was forbidden to partake of the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (Gen. 2:16,17) This constraint was a part of the covenant, or agreement, between the Creator and Adam. God, as Creator, had the right to dictate all the terms of the agreement; and Adam, being created in the image of God, would naturally accept these terms as being just and good, and in his own best interests.

However, Adam transgressed the covenant, not because he was out of harmony with it, but because he yielded to temptation. Yet, he had the ability to resist temptation, so his transgression was not due to weakness. Thus, he forfeited the blessings provided by the covenant, the chief of which was life. He was expelled from his garden home into the unfinished earth to eventually die. God and Adam were no longer in agreement, in covenant relationship. Adam had alienated himself from his Creator. —Gen. 3:17-24

RECONCILIATION

Although Adam’s transgression of the covenant brought upon him and his progeny condemnation to death, God did not cease to love his human creation. He had a plan for their reconciliation that would lead to their redemption from sin and to restoration of life. A very general statement of this plan is in the familiar words: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”—John 3:16

The Apostle Paul presents a similar thought. He wrote, "For through the Messiah, God was reconciling the world to himself." (II Cor. 5:19, *International Standard Version*) Through Christ, the Messiah, Adam and all his progeny are to have an opportunity to return to harmony with God, and to receive the blessings originally provided in God's covenant with Adam, including everlasting life.

In his dealings with Abraham, God began to reveal certain details of his plan for reconciling the world to himself. He promised Abraham that through his seed "all families of the earth" would be blessed. (Gen. 12:3; 22:18) This promise was repeated on various occasions, and finally God bound, or secured, it by his oath. This was after Abraham had proved his implicit trust in God by his willingness to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice. —Gen. 22:16-18; Heb. 6:13-17

Abraham did not realize the tremendous scope of God's plan of blessing as it was contained in the promise that through his seed all families of the earth would be blessed. Indeed, none of the ancient servants of God fully understood all the implications of the promise God made to Abraham. It was only after the First Advent of Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon his apostles at Pentecost, that the meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant became more clearly comprehended.

For example, Paul wrote, "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." (Gal. 3:16) How could Abraham know that the promise God made to him did not apply to his son Isaac, nor to his grandson Jacob,

but to one who would be born into the world thousands of years later? Jesus was, through his mother, a natural descendant of Abraham. However, this fact alone did not qualify him to be the seed that was to be developed in fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham that he bound by his oath.

Paul makes clear this point by expressing his regret over Israel's failure to accept Christ, and their consequent loss. The apostle wrote concerning them, "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. 9:4-8

Paul then refers to God's dealings with Abraham as an illustration of the point he is making. He states, "This is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sara shall have a son." (vs. 9) Earlier in his epistle Paul enlarged upon this, showing that it was through Abraham being "strong in faith ... and fully persuaded" that Isaac, the promised seed, was born. Isaac was a child of faith, for God honored Abraham's faith and by a miracle enabled Sarah to conceive and bear a son. —Rom. 4:18-22

We understand then, from Paul's reasoning, that the true seed of Abraham must, like him, exercise obedient faith in the promises and covenants of God. That this was true of Jesus there can be no doubt, and it was his faith and obedience that qualified him to be the seed of promise. The right of becoming sons of God belonged to all the natural descendants of Abraham, but it was incumbent upon them, through faith and obedience, to prove themselves worthy of this birthright. Jesus did thus qualify and became the "author [Greek: chief leader] ... of our faith," the first true spiritual seed of God's agreement, or covenant, with Abraham.—Heb. 12:2; Rev. 1:5; Acts 26:23

FELLOW MEMBERS

In Galatians 3:16 the Apostle Paul, referring to the promise made to Abraham, explains that it implied "one" seed, and that seed was Christ. However, in verses 27-29 he explains further that those who "have been baptized into Christ," and thus "have put on Christ," are also "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." This is because, as he explains, "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

It is clear, then, that the truly consecrated followers of Jesus, those who are baptized into his death, are a part of the one seed of Abraham, through which all the families of the earth are to be blessed. These also, together with Jesus, are the faith offspring of the covenant which God made with Abraham, for as Paul wrote, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus."—Gal. 3:26

HAGAR AND SARAH

In Galatians 4:22-31 Paul presents an "allegory" in which he uses Hagar, or Agar, a "bondmaid,"

and Sarah, a “freewoman,” to help us understand our relationship to the covenant which God made with Abraham. In Paul’s day many in the church were Jewish converts, and it was difficult for some of these to free themselves entirely from the Law that was given to the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. Some of these were even endeavoring to persuade Gentile converts that they should subscribe to and practice certain features of the Law. (Gal. 4:10; 5:1-4) It was to help these to a better understanding of the matter that Paul presented this allegory.

He reminds us of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. The two mothers, he explains, represent two covenants, “the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar,” the bondwoman and mother of Ishmael. Isaac, on the other hand, born to Sarah, was “of the freewoman ... by promise.” Continuing, Paul writes, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise”—that is, the “seed” promise made to Abraham.—vss. 23,24,28

In this lesson on the covenants, Paul quotes from a prophecy recorded in Isaiah 54:1, which speaks of a barren woman who finally was blessed with many children. Sarah, we know, was barren, and had become too old to bear children. Yet God rewarded the great faith of Abraham and Sarah, and by a miracle, Isaac was born. However, Isaac merely pointed forward to Christ, the promised seed of blessing. Like Sarah, God’s covenant with Abraham remained barren for many centuries. Finally, it gave birth to the promised seed, Jesus, who became the Head of this faith offspring and “took on him the seed of Abraham.”—Heb. 2:16

THE LAW COVENANT

Meanwhile God made another covenant. It was made with the natural descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel. This is the covenant referred to by Paul in Galatians 4:24 as being the one established at Mount Sinai. This covenant in no way took the place of, nor interfered with, the functioning and fulfillment of the covenant God made with Abraham. Paul asserts that it could not “disannul, that it should make the promise [to Abraham] of none effect.”—Gal. 3:17

“Wherefore then serveth the law?” Paul asked. He answered, “It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made.” (vs. 19) The phrase, “to whom the promise was made,” is significant. It reveals that at the time God made the promise to Abraham, he knew the covenant would remain barren for a long time. Therefore, when the natural descendants of Abraham became a nation, the Law Covenant was made with them to hold them together as a people until the time came in his plan for the true “faith seed” of Abraham to be developed.

Those composing the true seed of Abraham are to be God’s instrument of blessing to mankind. Abraham’s natural descendants were given the first opportunity to qualify for this high position in the plan of God. Their obedience to the terms of the Law Covenant would have prepared the nation of Israel to accept Christ when he came, and, through faith, together with him, become the seed of promise. To them God had said, “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then

ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”
—Exod. 19:5,6

In God’s covenant with Israel, they agreed to keep his Law, the essence of which is summed up in the Ten Commandments. (Exod. 20:1-17) On God’s part he promised to bless them in “basket” and in “store” in proportion to their faithfulness. (Deut. 28:5) If they would fully obey, he promised to give them life. (Gal. 3:12) As we have seen, they were also to be made a “kingdom of priests and an holy nation.”

Israel did not keep the terms of the Law Covenant to which they had agreed, so they lost all three of these promised rewards of faithfulness. A final test was the coming of Jesus to be their Messiah. Their rejection of him caused Jesus to say that the kingdom would be taken from them. (Matt. 21:43) They were driven from their land and scattered throughout the earth, and through the centuries they have been a persecuted people. Certainly, none of them has gained life through the Law. Like all the remainder of the world of mankind, they have continued to die.

A NEW COVENANT

God foreknew the failure of Israel as a people, and through the Prophet Jeremiah promised to make a “new covenant” with them in due time. (Jer. 31:31-34) Here then, is another of God’s covenants, the promise being that it would be made “with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” At the time this promise was made, the nation of Israel was divided (*Continued on page 36*)

(Continued from page 31) into ten tribes and two tribes, referred to as Israel and Judah in I Kings 11:29-37. The Lord included both segments of the nation in the promise of the New Covenant.

Introducing his promise of the New Covenant, the Lord says: "It shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the Lord. In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge."—Jer. 31:28-30

In principle, the "sour grape" illustration may be properly applied to the entire human race. Adam ate the sour grape of sin, and all his progeny have suffered the consequences, for all in Adam die. (Rom. 5:12; I Cor. 15:22) The "sour grape" picture also has an application to Israel as a nation. Those who rejected Jesus and were responsible for his death said, "His blood be on us, and on our children." (Matt. 27:25) Thus, Israel's scattering and suffering since is the result of the "edge" set upon their teeth.

As the Lord's promise assures us, however, this was not to continue forever. (Ezek. 18:1-9) "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.”—Jer. 31:31,32

It is important to notice that this New Covenant is made with those who broke the old, or Law Covenant. It is made following the scattering and punishment of Israel, as well as after their subsequent regathering. Another point important to note is that the New Covenant is “not according to the covenant” which God originally made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

This “not according” aspect of the New Covenant is explained in verses 33 and 34, which read, “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

In Part 2 of our lesson, to appear in the August issue of *The Dawn*, we will consider further comparisons between the old Law Covenant of Israel and the New Covenant. We will also recall Moses, Israel’s deliverer, as he points forward to Jesus, the great Deliverer of Israel and all mankind. Finally, we will discuss the important matter of the shedding of blood, without which there can be “no remission” of sins.—Heb. 9:22 ■