

The Promised New Covenant

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many unto remission of sins.”

—*Matthew 26:28,*
Revised Version

JESUS WAS IN THE “upper room” with his disciples the night before he was crucified when he asked them to drink of the “cup” which, he explained,

represented the “blood of the covenant,” spoken of in our opening text. (Mark 14:15) It was on this occasion also that he invited them to partake of the “bread,” saying that it symbolized his body, his flesh, which previously he had said he would give “for the life of the world.” (Matt. 26:26,27; John 6:51) The understanding of the “covenant” Jesus spoke of on this occasion, as well as other covenants detailed in the Bible, greatly enhances one’s appreciation of the divine purpose to reconcile the sin-cursed and dying human race to God.

The word covenant as used in our opening verse, and in many other places throughout the Bible, denotes an agreement or contract, of which God is the author. This meaning further suggests that a covenant has some connection to his eternal plans

and purposes for mankind—his creation. (Gen. 1:26,27) We need not look far to recognize that the human race has been out of “agreement” with God for thousands of years. In Hosea 6:7 (*Revised Version*) we read that mankind, like Adam, have “transgressed the covenant.” This indicates that a covenant existed between God and Adam—that they were in harmony with each other and would have continued so if Adam had not transgressed that covenant.

However, Adam did transgress. He broke the terms of that covenant, including the bond of friendship and fellowship which existed between himself and his Creator. God then invoked the penalty associated with breaking that covenant, which was death. “In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” (Gen. 2:17) Alienated from God by reason of his sin, with the dying process commencing to work in him, Adam’s children were born imperfect. Thus, because of their imperfection they, too, came under condemnation. Not having God’s favor they could not continue to live, so, as Paul explained, all “in Adam” of necessity die.—I Cor. 15:22

Although death has continued to reign, God has indicated to some of the fallen race whom he has chosen to serve him that he has a plan to change the situation. He entered into a covenant with Abraham, promising that through his “seed” all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Gen. 22:16-18) This indicated that God had not abandoned his human creation. He implied that in his own due time they would be reconciled to him through this “seed” which he promised to Abraham would bless the people.

In the New Testament Paul calls our attention to a limiting factor in the downward course of the human race, saying that “death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression.” (Rom. 5:14) This is most revealing. Adam’s transgression was willful. He could have elected not to eat the forbidden fruit, but he chose the course of disobedience. However, the situation was not the same with his offspring. They were born in sin, hence under condemnation, without their being willfully responsible for their own position. Paul explained, death continued to reign, even though all were not, as Adam was, willful sinners.

THE LAW COVENANT

This universal and unchecked reign of sin continued only until Moses. Then there was a change. It was not a change sufficiently effective to prevent even a single member of the fallen race from dying. Nevertheless, by God’s design a deterrent against the ravages of sin was provided for the one small nation of Israel. It was a “law, and commandments,” which became the basis of a covenant into which Jehovah entered with that nation, with Moses serving as a mediator.—Exod. 24:12; Gal. 3:19

Israel’s covenant was an embodiment of God’s law, and therefore a standard of righteousness required by him on the part of all who would enjoy his favor, and who would desire to be at peace with him. Paul wrote that the Law was “spiritual,” meaning simply, that it came from God. (Rom. 7:12,14) It was ordained to be “unto life,” but, as the apostle explained, it was “found to be unto death.”—Rom. 7:10, *RV*

Under the leadership of faithful servants of God, the nation of Israel at times was fairly enthusiastic in their effort to keep the Law Covenant and enjoy the blessings which it provided. Doubtless in every generation there were individuals who endeavored earnestly to maintain their covenant relationship with God upon the basis of keeping the Law's requirements, but none could do so perfectly.

To keep the Law was beyond the ability of any member of the fallen race. God knew this, but he wanted the Israelites to try, for he wanted to demonstrate the need for the atoning blood of the Redeemer. Paul explained that the Law was therefore a "schoolmaster," to teach the necessity of looking to Christ and to the provision of his shed blood to provide redemption. (Gal. 3:24) Only a relatively few Israelites continued their efforts to keep that Law, and to learn the lesson which it taught. As a result, when Jesus came at his First Advent, most Jews did not accept him as their Messiah, the one to whom the Law, as a schoolmaster, had been pointing.

Despite the general inability of the people of Israel to gain peace with God and his promised blessings under the Law Covenant, they were not left without hope, for the Heavenly Father made a promise to them of a "New Covenant." This promise is recorded in Jeremiah 31:31-34. The promise of a New Covenant was given subsequent to the division of the nation into the northern, ten-tribe kingdom, and the southern, two-tribe kingdom. These two segments of Israelites are frequently referred to in the prophecies as "Israel" and "Judah." In making his promise of future blessings, God included them

all, stating that the New Covenant was to be made “with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.”—vs. 31

This New Covenant was not to be like the one the Lord made with the Israelites when he “took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake.” The Scriptures indicate that the essential difference between the two covenants would be in the fact that the latter, or New Covenant, would not be “written and engraven in stones,” as was the former Law Covenant. Rather, under the New Covenant, Jehovah would put his “law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. ... 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.”—Jer. 31:32-34; II Cor. 3:7

THE BLOOD

God’s past and future covenant promises to Israel are examples of his even greater and all-encompassing purpose to re-establish his law in the hearts of all mankind and to reconcile the entire sin-cursed race to himself. From the beginning of human experience with sin, God began to show that the basis upon which man’s recovery would be accomplished is through the shedding of blood. For this reason he showed his favor to Abel by accepting the animal sacrifice which he offered.—Gen. 4:4; Heb. 11:4

The slaying of the Passover lamb in Egypt, and the sprinkling of its blood upon the lintels and doorposts of the Israelites’ houses, constituted

another picture emphasizing the necessity of the shedding of blood. In this instance, the firstborn of the nation were first saved, and the next morning all Israel was delivered from bondage, picturing the deliverance of all mankind from the thralldom of sin and death.—Exod. 12:1-13,40-42

Later, when the Law Covenant was made with the nation, there was again the shedding of blood. Moses and his assistants sacrificed burnt offerings, peace offerings, and oxen, collecting the blood in basins. Then, when the covenant was inaugurated, this blood was used to sprinkle both the book of the Law, and all the people.—Exod. 24:5-8; Heb. 9:19,20

Following the inauguration of the Law Covenant, the Tabernacle was set up and its services initiated, and again there was the shedding of blood. (Heb. 9:21) Important among these services were the yearly Day of Atonement ceremonies in which a bullock and a goat were slain. Their blood was taken into the Most Holy of the Tabernacle and sprinkled on and before the mercy seat, to make reconciliation, first for Aaron and his house, and then for all the people.—Lev. 16:1-34

All of this shedding of blood, beginning with Abel and continuing in one ceremony or another to the coming of Jesus at his First Advent, pointed forward to his blood. Paul explains that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin, but the blood of Jesus can. (Heb. 10:4) It is sin that has alienated the human race from God, and that sin must be atoned for, expiated, before the people can be reconciled to God, and before he can put his law “in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.”

The making of this New Covenant and the expiation of sin is the great objective of God's plan of reconciliation. Peter describes this grand purpose as the "restitution of all things," spoken by the mouth of all God's holy prophets. (Acts 3:20,21) How fitting, therefore, that Jesus should speak of his blood as being the "blood of the covenant." It is, indeed, the value of his sinless life, given up in sacrifice and represented by the life-giving virtue of blood, that will make possible the regaining of perfect human life by all of Adam's race during the coming Messianic kingdom.

MINISTERS OF THE COVENANT

There are certain texts of Scripture which, if interpreted apart from the general testimony of the Bible on this subject, might be thought to indicate that the promised New Covenant was inaugurated by Jesus at his First Advent, and that it has been gradually expanding since then as more and more believers come under its terms. In this we have much the same situation as that which exists respecting the Bible's testimony pertaining to the promised kingdom of Christ. Many have contended that the kingdom was established at Pentecost, whereas merely the selection and preparation of Jesus' associate rulers began there.

Jesus is the "KING OF KINGS" in his kingdom, but there will be 144,000 selected from the human race to reign with him. (Rev. 19:16; 14:1; 20:6) They will be both kings and priests. Jesus will also be the "mediator" of the New Covenant, the principal one in bringing about the reconciliation of the world to God. (I Tim. 2:5,6; Heb. 12:24) However,

those who reign with Jesus as kings will also be associated with him in the work of reconciliation. Paul speaks of these as “able ministers” of the New Covenant.—II Cor. 3:6

The work of the present Gospel Age has been the selection and preparation of these for the high position they will occupy with Jesus during the thousand years of Christ’s kingdom. Their training involves the necessity of sacrifice, of laying down life itself in proof of their fidelity to God and to the divine principles of righteousness which they will be called upon to establish in the minds and hearts of men.

These “able ministers,” of which Paul spoke, themselves enter into a covenant with God—not the foretold New Covenant, but a “covenant ... by sacrifice.” (Ps. 50:5) There is nothing said in connection with God’s promises of the New Covenant to indicate that those with whom it will be made will be called upon to sacrifice. The original Law Covenant promised bountiful earthly blessings to Israel. (Deut. 28:1-6) It will be the same with the New Covenant. It is a covenant of restoration, and those in whose hearts its laws become fully written, and lived by, will be perfect mentally, morally and physically, and will live forever as human beings.

SACRIFICE AND GLORY

We have noted that there was a certain preparatory work which preceded the inauguration of the Law Covenant. It was a work involving animal sacrifices and required only one or two days to complete. Preparation for the New Covenant, however, does not involve animal sacrifices, and is spread out over the present Gospel Age—approximately

two symbolic “days” of a thousand years each. (II Pet. 3:8) This sacrificial work of preparation for the New Covenant began with Jesus’ death at Calvary. His footstep followers, though having no merit of their own as far as the redemptive work is concerned, nevertheless, are invited to offer themselves in sacrifice, suffering and service. (Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15,16; I Pet. 2:5) Thus they are counted as having a share in the development of a sympathetic “royal priesthood,” in preparation for the administration of the New Covenant.—Heb. 9:23; I Pet. 2:9

It is after this sacrificial work is completed that the New Covenant will be inaugurated. In II Corinthians 3:3, Paul speaks of the literal “tables of stone” and the laws which were written on them. He then explains that by the Spirit of God his law is now being written in the “fleshy tables” of our hearts. This suggests the manner in which we are prepared as “able ministers” of the New Covenant. At the institution of the Law Covenant, the tables of stone accompanied Moses when he came down from the mount. As his face was ablaze with the glory of God, so the promise is that those who are faithful in suffering and dying with Jesus, will appear with him in glory.—Exod. 34:29-35; Col. 3:4

The ministry of the Law Covenant was a “ministration of death,” because the people could not measure up to the requirements of the law that was “written and engraven in stones.” (II Cor. 3:7) However, the “ministration of the spirit” which is now writing God’s law in the “fleshy tables” of our hearts, preparing us to be ministers of the New Covenant, will result in the opportunity being given to all mankind of attaining everlasting life.—vs. 8

Paul then speaks of the comparative “glory” of the former Law Covenant arrangement with that of the coming New Covenant. “If the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. ... Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech.”—II Cor. 3:9-12

In the next chapter, Paul alludes to the “glory that excelleth,” describing it as “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,” which is preceded by our present “light affliction” of sacrifice and suffering. (II Cor. 4:17) We have the afflictions now, while we lay down our lives in keeping with the “covenant by sacrifice” into which we have entered with God. The glory that excels, and which will accompany the inauguration of the New Covenant, is as yet but a hope. In Romans 8:24 Paul explains, “Hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” These scriptures further emphasize the point that the glorious inauguration of the New Covenant is yet future, and that the preparatory work of sacrifice still continues.

“HOW MUCH MORE”

Paul explains that the “blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean” had a certain purifying effect, that it “sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh.” Then he adds, however, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”—Heb. 9:13,14

We are being purged to serve the living God as ministers, or servants, of the New Covenant. “For this cause,” the apostle adds, “He [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant.” (vs. 15, *RV*) He does not mediate between God and us to bring us into that covenant. Rather, he purges, or purifies, us that we may offer ourselves in acceptable sacrifice, and thus qualify to be associated with him, as members of his body, in the future ministration of the New Covenant.

While Jesus, the Head of the Christ class, finished his sacrifice, all of his body members have not. They are still being “planted together in the likeness of his death,” that they might “be also in the likeness of his resurrection.” (Rom. 6:5) The New Covenant cannot be in force until this aspect of the divine arrangement is finished.

GIVEN FOR A COVENANT

In Isaiah 42:1-7 we have a prophecy concerning Jesus, the chosen “servant” of Jehovah. In verse 6 we read, “I the Lord have called thee [Christ] in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people.” The thought is that through Jesus the promised New Covenant would be made with the people, and that he would be “given” in sacrifice as a surety for that covenant.

The Apostle Paul knew from another portion of Isaiah’s prophecy that Jesus would not be alone in this. In II Corinthians 6:1 he refers to our being co-laborers and beseeches us to receive not this “grace of God” in vain. Then in the next verse he quotes from Isaiah 49:8 concerning “a season acceptable” and a “day of salvation,” adding, “Behold! now

is a well-accepted season; behold! now is a day of salvation.”—*The Emphatic Diaglott*

Thus, the Apostle Paul identifies Isaiah 49:8 as applying to the footstep followers of Jesus. It reads, “In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages.” In this prophecy a promise is made to the faithful followers of Jesus which is identical in meaning with the one made to Jesus in Isaiah 42:6. How clear it is from the combined testimony of Isaiah and Paul that the inauguration of the New Covenant must wait until these joint-sacrificers with Jesus have finished their course in death.

If we are to understand the lessons presented to us in the Book of Hebrews, we must realize that Paul places the church, not as being represented by the camp of Israel, but by the priesthood, the servants of God being prepared to assist in administering the New Covenant. Their preparation as ministers of the New Covenant is the work of the present Gospel Age. We are now fulfilling our covenant with the Lord by sacrifice, and at the same time being trained for the future work of glory as kings and priests with Christ Jesus, and as ministers of the New Covenant which will bring about the reconciliation of the world to God.

The entire scope of this work is suggested by Paul when he wrote that God was, through the work of Christ, “reconciling the world unto himself.” This is the great objective of God’s plan as it is centered in Christ. To us, Paul added, has been

committed “the word of reconciliation.” (II Cor. 5:18,19) It is upon this basis that we are “ambassadors for Christ.” Even in the development of the church class, the individuals being drawn to God and called into his service need to be reconciled to God, so we are commissioned to say to these, “Be ye reconciled to God.”—vs. 20

Thus, in the great economy of God, we are being prepared for the future work of reconciling the world through the arrangements of the New Covenant, by now serving what might be termed an apprenticeship. Thereby we are given the great privilege of demonstrating our complete harmony with the future work in which we hope to share, though, like Jesus, our present work is under conditions which call for sacrifice, suffering and faithfulness, even unto death.—Rev. 2:10

In his epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul indicates our relationship to, and development under, the original covenant God made with Abraham. In Galatians 3:17, he makes the important statement that the promises cited in God’s covenant with Abraham preceded the establishment of the Law Covenant by more than four hundred years, and of necessity, would also precede the promised New Covenant by a much longer span of time. The covenant made with Abraham, Paul said, calls for the development of a “seed,” which he identifies as Christ. (vs. 16) Then, later in the chapter, the apostle adds that if we are “in Christ Jesus,” and prove faithful in fully belonging to him, we will be counted as part of “Abraham’s seed,” and together with him, be “heirs according to the promise.”—vss. 26-29

We recall that Isaac was the long-promised natural seed of Abraham, and as such most assuredly pointed forward to Christ as the greater seed through which blessings will eventually come to all the families of the earth. In the next chapter of Galatians, however, Paul states that the church also is represented in Isaac. He says, “We, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.” (Gal. 4:28) This means that Isaac, as Abraham’s natural seed, foreshadowed the greater “seed” class—Jesus and his church—as those who will be the instruments of blessing to mankind under the New Covenant arrangement. Through this covenant the blessings promised in the covenant with Abraham, will be made available not only to the “house of Israel,” and the “house of Judah,” but to “all the families of the earth.”—Gen. 22:18; 28:14

Surely, we can thank God for his “high calling” through Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:14) We recognize, as Paul did, that the attaining of such an honored position in his plan of salvation lies only in the conviction that “our sufficiency is of God,” and not of ourselves. (II Cor. 3:5) As he guided and directed the path trodden by his beloved Son, Jesus, and helped him, we know from the Heavenly Father’s promise that he will also help and preserve us, and together with Jesus give us a “covenant of the people.” (Isa. 42:6; 49:8) Then, under that New Covenant, all the willing and obedient of the world will be reconciled to God, come into heart harmony with him, and be restored to that original “at-one-ment” with the Creator enjoyed by Adam prior to the time when he transgressed the covenant. ■