God's Great Oath-bound Covenant

"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."
—Galatians 3:8

THE APOSTLE PAUL IN THE above verse links together a profound statement of God to Abraham, recorded in the 22nd chapter of Genesis, with the gospel of Christ and the ultimate work of the gospel—to bless all the families of the earth.

Turning to Genesis 22:15-18, we read, "The angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, And 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."

This covenant promise is so significant in God's dealings with man that he repeated it several times to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and also sealed it with his oath. Reference is made, directly or indirectly, to this covenant in nearly all of the sixty-six books of the Bible; and the Apostle Paul, in particular, elaborates in the books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews concerning its fulfillment through the work of Christ.

THREE MAJOR COVENANTS

The Bible refers to other covenants that would follow the giving of this promise to Abraham. The Mosaic Law Covenant was added to the Abrahamic Covenant 430 years later, according to Paul in Galatians 3:17, and was to serve the arrangements of God with the typical nation of Israel during the Jewish Age, which ended at the time of our Lord's First Advent. Next, there is the covenant of sacrifice during this Gospel Age, in which the spiritual seed of promise, the 'stars of heaven' class, are being developed—our Lord and his church. This is referred to in Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." The psalmist refers to "those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." (Ps. 50:5) We speak of this also as the Grace Covenant (Rom. 6:14), because it is through the grace of God in Christ that we are accounted worthy to become sons of God, through faith.

Third in this order is the covenant of the Messianic Age, referred to by Jesus as the kingdom of God. This age and its covenant is still future, though prophecies indicate we are very near to its establishment. With this age will come the grand fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, that through his seed—the spiritual seed, our Lord and his church—all the families of the earth will be blessed. Adam and his race will gain back all that was lost in Eden when, through the work of the New Covenant, all the willing and obedient of mankind will ultimately attain full perfection and be restored to favor with God, and live everlastingly on the perfected earth.

The Apostle Paul, quoting from the Prophet Jeremiah, says this about that future arrangement, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when 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 when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." (Heb. 8:8-12) As Paul states, the 'new covenant'

will be made first with Israel. They are symbolic of all nations and peoples, and as mankind sees the benefits of coming into harmony with its arrangements, all people, both Jew and Gentile, will receive the blessings of the New Covenant, fulfilling the promise that indeed 'all' families of the earth will be blessed.

WHY GOD USES COVENANTS

Before looking into these covenants more deeply, we first ask the question, 'Why are these covenants necessary?' Adam's failure to keep God's law had cut himself and his race off from Divine favor and placed them under Divine sentence, and nothing that man could do could restore that favor. The initiative toward reconciliation must come from God, if at all. God's covenants, then, are statements of his propositions for reconciliation, and indicate how, with whom, and by whom it shall be accomplished.

The word 'covenant,' or 'testament,' means, in legal terms, a contract. It may be unilateral (one-sided) or bilateral (two-sided). That is, it may be unconditional or conditional. Where a covenant is conditional each contracting party must fulfill certain conditions before the purpose of the covenant can be met. Where unconditional, a covenant and its fulfillment are dependent on only one party. Going back to the covenant, or promise, given to Abraham in Genesis 22, we notice that it is merely a statement of what God would do, with no conditions attached so far as Abraham is concerned. Thus, it is a unilateral, or one-sided covenant. Since it has no condition, or arrangements, for its own fulfillment other than the veiled language in its giving

by God, it depends on the other great covenants that would be added to it later to provide the detailed arrangements of God for the carrying out of his promise to Abraham and all the families of the earth. These other great covenants, as previously mentioned, are the Law Covenant of the Jewish Age; the covenant by sacrifice, or Grace Covenant, of the Gospel Age; and the New Covenant of the Messianic Age.

Any and all blessing ever coming to the members of the human family is the fruitage of that original promise to Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant is like a great canopy, or umbrella, over all of God's arrangements and subsequent covenants. Everything that God has done and will yet do for the human race is included in that covenant.

THE LAW COVENANT

The first covenant to be added to the Abrahamic Covenant, and thus the first to have a role in fulfilling God's great promise, was the Mosaic Law Covenant. When God brought the descendants of Abraham—the nation of Israel—out of Egypt and on their way to the promised land, Canaan, he led them to Mt. Sinai. There he entered into a national covenant with them known as the Law Covenant. As a basis for this covenant, or contract, Ten Commandments were miraculously written upon two tables of stone, as recorded in Exodus 20:3-17. Then, in the following chapters of Exodus, God elaborates upon all the details and laws concerning how those ten commandments should be applied in their lives.

God appointed Moses as the mediator to ratify the covenant on behalf of the people. God's proposal to

them is stated in Deuteronomy 5:32,33, "Ye shall observe to do therefore as the LORD your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. Ye shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God hath commanded you, that ye may live." Israel's response to this is best stated in Exodus 24:7, "He [Moses] took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient." This was a bilateral, or two-sided, covenant. Both God and Israel agreed to the terms of the contract.

In order for God to deal with Israel through the Law Covenant, it was necessary for the sins of the people to be at least typically atoned for through animal sacrifices. This was done through the establishment of a priesthood, with Aaron as the high priest, who offered up sacrifices each year on behalf of the nation so that they could maintain their covenant standing before God.

It perhaps seemed that through the arrangement of the Law Covenant, the Abrahamic promise would be fulfilled through the fleshly seed of Abraham, the nation of Israel. Yet this did not prove to be the case. Not a single Jew was able to keep that law perfectly, nor was their priesthood perfect, thus they were unable to gain the promised blessing of that covenant, nor be recipients of the promise made to Abraham centuries earlier. In fact, they brought further punishment upon themselves when they rejected Jesus, when he came at his First Advent, and crucified him.

Was God's dealing with Israel during that long period of time a mistake, since the stated benefits

of the law were never achieved, and the promises to Abraham never received, even by one Jew? No, God in his foreknowledge knew what the outcome would be. What was, then, the purpose of the law, or, as Apostle Paul asks, "Wherefore then serveth the law?"—Gal. 3:19

JESUS KEPT AND FULFILLED THE LAW

First, our Lord Jesus had a standard of righteousness to live up to for three and one half years. He was also "under the law." (Gal. 4:4) By keeping that law perfectly, every "jot" and "tittle" (Matt. 5:18), he proved his perfection, and thus his value as a ransom, or corresponding price, for Adam. In order for Adam and his race to be redeemed, it required a perfect human life, equivalent to Adam's perfect life before he sinned. Jesus took Adam's place under the condemnation of death. He proved himself to be a perfect sacrifice in this respect by perfectly keeping God's law which he had given to Israel when he established his covenant with them centuries earlier.

Jesus, however, did more than merely keep the law perfectly. He also 'fulfilled the law'. The fulfilling of the law began with Jesus and includes the church, his faithful followers, as they fulfill the types and pictures of the law arrangement. Briefly stated, the Law Covenant was to illustrate through a variety of types, pictures, and prophetic lessons, the manner in which sin would need to be dealt with before the Abrahamic promise could be fulfilled. Every feature of the law—the Ten Commandments, the Books of the Law, the Tabernacle in the wilderness—all addressed themselves to the matter

of sin. It is true, of course, that those animal sacrifices could not actually take away sin, yet they illustrated in remarkably detailed ways how sin would be dealt with through the "better sacrifices" of the Gospel Age. (Heb. 9:23) The Apostle Paul states that the law served "unto the example and shadow of heavenly things." "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." "But this man [Jesus], after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God." "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified."—Heb. 8:5; 9:24; 10:4,12,14

THE GOSPEL AGE COVENANT

As previously noted, the church of this present Gospel Age—the followers of Christ—are not under the Law, but under the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 6:14 states it this way, "Sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." Also, in Romans 3:24, we read, "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The law only served to illustrate and point forward to the real seed of promise—our Lord and his church—who, after completing their sacrifice, will experience a change of nature, and will be with our Lord in the heavenlies as Divine spirit beings.

Going back to the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 22:17, we notice that there is a 'multiplying' of seed specified—first, as the 'stars of the heaven,'

and then as the 'sand which is upon the seashore.' Paul, in Hebrews 11:12, refers to this increase or multiplication of seed, using the same symbols of "stars" and "sand." These are two distinct lines of salvation that will come through the antitypical Isaac, Abraham's natural seed of promise, representing Christ. The 'stars of the heaven' refers to the church, who will have a heavenly inheritance. The 'sand which is upon the sea shore' refers to all the families of the earth who are to be blessed and uplifted by the spiritual seed during Christ's coming kingdom. They will have an earthly inheritance.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY IN GALATIANS

The Apostle Paul elaborates on these matters in the 3rd and 4th chapters of Galatians. He says, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." (Gal. 3:7) We are the 'faith seed' of Abraham, and this is true even if we are Gentiles. "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (vs. 14) Cornelius was the first Gentile convert, opening up the Gospel call to the Gentiles beginning in A.D. 36. (see Acts 10) Paul continues, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For 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. 3:26-29) In the type, Isaac was the natural seed of promise and Sarah was his mother.

In Galatians 4, Paul refers to this as an allegory and explains that Sarah represents the covenant that will bring forth the spiritual seed of promise, represented in Isaac. "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise."—Gal. 4:28

During this present time, God is selecting out from among earth's millions a few whose hearts are right before him, those who are willing to take up their cross and follow him. These faithful ones are having their minds, hearts, and characters prepared for a future work, as stated in the promise repeated later to Jacob, "in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 28:14) Revelation 14:1 reads, "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." We believe that this is the literal number of those who will make up the bride of Christ. Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."—Luke 12:32

These are not developed under the old Law Covenant, because Jesus kept it, "and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." (Col. 2:14) Neither are they developed under the New Covenant, which encompasses only earthly hopes, reserved for Israel and the world of mankind in Christ's coming kingdom. Rather, these have the wonderful privilege of responding to the call to discipleship with their Lord, by the grace of God, to lay down their life in sacrifice with their master, and to be counted as part of the promised seed—the antitypical Isaac class. Thus we see how the prospective members of this heavenly 'little flock' are spoken of as developed

under a covenant of grace, a covenant by sacrifice—in short, the Sarah feature of the Abrahamic Covenant. There is no greater aspiration that one could have in this life than to serve the living God, our loving heavenly Father, under these arrangements.

THE NEW COVENANT

Soon the Gospel Age will end and God will initiate the "restitution of all things" mentioned by Peter in Acts 3:21, concerning which he said, "God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." This will be for all people, the 'blessing of all the families of the earth.' This will not be a doomsday for the world, but a time of great rejoicing. The curse will be lifted, the night time of sin and ignorance will be ended, and a great age of enlightenment will begin, when the prophet tells us that the knowledge of the Lord shall fill the earth, and the people will learn righteousness. (Isa. 26:9) Man's great enemies will not be there—the present evil world, the fallen flesh, and the devil, who will be bound. At that time, God will add to the Abrahamic Covenant still another covenant—the New Covenant. This will be the grand climax of God's plan of salvation. It will be the kingdom for which our Lord taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."—Matt. 6:10

The Apostle John prophetically referred to that day, writing down what he heard in this way, "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. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son."—Rev. 21:3-7

The New Covenant, unlike the old Law Covenant, will bring life everlasting to all those who seek righteousness and learn to walk in the ways of the Lord, and we believe the vast majority of mankind will be successful in attaining life under the perfect conditions of the kingdom. Jesus and his church will be the mediator between God and mankind under this covenant during the time of their reconciliation, a period of a thousand years.

THE EARTH TO ABIDE FOREVER

Many Christians believe the teaching that has been handed down from the Dark Ages that the earth is going to be burned up in what is sometimes described as a great doomsday for mankind. God's original purpose of creating the earth, however, will be fulfilled. The Bible, throughout its pages, speaks of the everlasting, righteous conditions that are to be established on the earth as man's inheritance forever. Two such statements are very simply and clearly made—"The earth abideth forever."

"God himself that formed the earth . . . he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited."—Eccles. 1:4; Isa. 45:18

There are many prophecies, though, which symbolize by fire the manner in which this present evil order upon the earth will be destroyed. This present order of things will have to be destroyed before Christ can set up his kingdom of righteousness upon the earth. This in no way, however, means the destruction of the earth itself. Notice the testimonies of both the Old and New Testament which speak symbolically of the destruction of this present evil world, but then immediately make reference to blessings upon the earth and its inhabitants which will follow. "My determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation, even all my fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of my jealousy. For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent. (Zeph. 3:8,9) "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. . . . Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."—II Pet. 3:10,13

How meaningful now are the words of our theme text—Galatians 3:8—when understood in the light of God's plan of salvation—"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." Through his seed—our Lord and his church—all the families

of the earth will be blessed in that wonderful age which is just before us. One writer, when he saw these great truths in God's Word, was so thrilled that he wrote these beautiful and long-enduring words:

A Preview of the Kingdom

"Close your eyes for a moment to the scenes of misery and woe, degradation, and sorrow that yet prevail on account of sin, and picture before your mental vision the glory of the perfect earth. Not a stain of sin mars the harmony and peace of a perfect society; not a bitter thought, not an unkind look or word; love, welling up from every heart, meets a kindred response in every other heart, and benevolence marks every act. There sickness shall be no more; not an ache nor a pain, nor any evidence of decay—not even the fear of such things. Think of all the pictures of comparative health and beauty of human form and feature that you have ever seen, and know that perfect humanity will be of still surpassing loveliness. The inward purity and mental and moral perfection will stamp and glorify every radiant countenance. Such will earth's society be; and weeping bereaved ones will have their tears all wiped away, when thus they realize the resurrection work complete."

Do these words of God's plan sound too good to be true? Surely not, because they are clearly taught in the Bible, and his plan is just what we would expect of a just, loving, and covenant-keeping God. ■