

## GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

Any man, if he is going to fully trust God with his life, needs to be very certain he has obtained God's favour. This was the situation which faced Abraham when he was given the promise in his old age that he would have descendants whose number would be beyond counting. He was told, "... 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him. 'So shall your offspring be.'" (Genesis 15:5). God also promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan (15:7). This land is to be an everlasting possession. "All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." (13:15. See also 17:8). Abraham must have been very excited when God gave him this promise, because he is in fact promising him everlasting life, as an everlasting possession is of no value without an everlasting life to go with it. It is not surprising that Abraham said, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?" (Gen. 15:8).

In the time of Abraham, if a person wanted to enter into a very firm and binding covenant with another person, he would cut some animals in half, lay them out in a path with the halves opposite each other. He would then walk down the path between the pieces to symbolically say to the other person, "If I do not keep my part of the covenant, may I be as these animals are now." The other person would then walk behind the first person to symbolically say, "If I do not keep my part of the covenant, may I be as these animals." It is obviously not the type of covenant which can be entered into lightly.

It is at this point that God does an amazing thing to show Abraham his determination to save at least some sinners, bring them to himself, and give them the possession of the land. "...the Lord said to him. 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'" (Gen. 15:9). The animals were then cut in two, and laid out with the halves opposite each other. The birds were not cut. When the sun had set, Abraham saw a smoking fire pot pass between the pieces. This he knew was God making the covenant with him. Now it was Abraham's turn to walk between the pieces to show his determination to keep his side of the covenant, however, he was not able to, as God had caused a deep sleep to come over him (Gen. 15:12).

Abraham saw a substitute go between the pieces in his place, the "blazing torch" (15:17). His substitute was Christ. The meaning of all this being that God is determined to save a large number of sinful humanity by means of someone far greater than Abraham. God will use a substitute to make sure the covenant is not forever broken by a failure of Abraham, or any of his descendants to keep it.

Christ takes up the obligation of Abraham to faithfully serve God without sin. He also takes up the obligation to pay for the sins of Abraham and all those who are part of this covenant of love, i.e. all believers.

The promise is "rock solid" because it is established through the work of Christ. The blessings from Christ's work flow on even to the Gentiles (non-Jews). "For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, **to confirm the promises** made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing

hymns to your name.'" (Romans 15:8-9).

### Christ with the People of Israel

Christ not only appeared to Abraham as a blazing torch, he also appeared to the whole of the assembly of Israel in that way. From the book of Exodus we learn that "By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night." (Ex.13:21). The pillar of fire and cloud is representative of God's presence (Ex. 3:2, 14:24, 16:10, 19:9, 24:16, 33:9, Is. 6:4). The New Testament speaks of Christ giving the large crowd in the wilderness spiritual nourishment. "...for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." (1 Corinthians 10:4).

### The Wider Covenant

At the heart of God's saving grace toward all believers is the covenant with Abraham. At a later stage a covenant is made with the whole (physical) Israelite nation, this covenant is a much wider covenant (in its range of blessings) in which God promises to bless the land of Israel if the people will be faithful to God and serve him. This wider covenant was confirmed at Mt. Sinai. The people in their eagerness to have God over them as king said, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." (Exodus 24:7).

If the people break the covenant by turning from God to serve the gods of the nations about them, then God will turn his back on them. Moses warned the people, "The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies." (Deut. 28:25). "The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand." (Deuteronomy 28:49).

### The Failure of Israel

Israel repeatedly failed to obey God and keep the covenant, so God raised up prophets to warn the people; but they ignored the prophets, so he withheld the rain, and sent locusts as he warned he would do (Amos 4:9). Eventually God sent the Assyrian army who destroyed Samaria in 722 B.C.

In regard to its destruction the Bible says, "In the ninth year of Hoshea [king of Israel], the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the Medes." (2 Kings 17:6). Shalmaneser the king of Assyria also sent people in from foreign lands so that the people of Samaria would be further weakened. "...They took over Samaria and lived in their towns." (2 Kings 17:24). "All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt..." (2 Kings 17:7). The Bible says in another place. "So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left..." (2 Kings 17:18). In this way, the northern ten tribes of Israel ceased to be a distinct race.

The two tribes of Israel which made up the southern kingdom (Judah and Benjamin) were warned that if they did

not follow God faithfully, then God would raise up an army against them also. The southern kingdom failed to keep true to the covenant with the result that God gave the following warning. "... I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle." (2 Kings 21:12). God sent the Babylonian army against Jerusalem and Judah. Jerusalem was completely destroyed during the reign of Zedekiah in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1-12). The nation was then held captive for seventy years.

The subsequent history of Israel is one of defeat, every major empire since that time has ruled over them. It is clear from their history that they are incapable of keeping the covenant that God made with them at Mt. Sinai in order to win the blessings of God. More seriously however, they have broken the everlasting covenant with Abraham, a point which is made clear by the prophet Isaiah who said, "The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and **broken the everlasting covenant.**" (Isaiah 24:5). Humanly speaking this leaves the whole of mankind in a hopeless situation. It is clear that if we are to receive the blessings of God, we must turn to someone who is capable of keeping the covenant faithfully for us on our behalf.

### The Success of Christ

It is precisely because the prophets, and all true believers recognised that they are incapable of fully meeting the demands of God, that they look for a saviour who is faithful. They look to the covenant that God made with Abraham and to the faithful covenant keeper. It is for that reason, Zechariah the priest said at the birth of John the Baptist - the one who would point people to Christ, and thus to salvation. "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people ... to show mercy to our fathers and to **remember his holy covenant**, the oath he swore to our father Abraham." (Luke 1:68-73). So the men and women of faith must not only look to this covenant, they must look to the substitute, Jesus Christ, who has faithfully kept the covenant on their behalf.

### The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic covenant which God made with the people of Israel through Moses (the wider covenant spoken of earlier) should not be confused with the covenant which he made with Abraham. The covenant made through Moses at Mt. Sinai offered the promise to the people that the one and only true God would be the God of the people of Israel if they kept the Ten Commandments and the many regulations for worshipping him. This covenant, like the covenant made with Abraham, was part of God's salvation plan. We are saved through this covenant - not by our keeping of it, because all of mankind falls short of God's standard of righteousness - but by the law-keeping, covenant-keeping Christ. The Mosaic covenant is a means of grace primarily in two ways:

1. It shows the sinfulness of mankind - thus our need of salvation. The apostle Paul said, "... I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.'" (Romans 7:7).
2. We are saved by a perfect keeping of the law (which this

covenant demands); not our keeping of the law, but by the law-keeping of Christ. It both promises life, and produces death (Rom. 7:10). Life for those who keep it through Christ (His keeping of it); death for those who try to keep it in their own strength.

### The New Covenant

God declared through the Old Testament Scriptures his intention to abolish the old covenant and establish a new one. It is not the abolishing of the covenant with Abraham which is being spoken of in these passages, as that covenant is an everlasting covenant. The covenant being spoken of is the covenant made with the whole of Israel at Mt. Sinai. A covenant which is unable to save people through their own law-keeping because of the sinfulness of humanity. God declared through Jeremiah, "'The time is coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant though I was a husband to them.' declares the Lord. 'This is the covenant I will make ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.'" (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

The writer to the Hebrews clearly states that the reason for the new covenant is the fact that "God found fault with the people..." (8:8). God, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah pulled no punches when he told the nation of Israel, "'From the time I brought your forefathers up from Egypt until today, I warned them again and again, saying, 'Obey me.' But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep.'" (Jeremiah 11:7-8). The curses they were warned about included diseases, drought, war and famine (Deuteronomy 28:14-47).

It is clear that the first covenant which is spoken of by the writer does not refer to the covenant made with Abraham, because not only does he tell us it was made at Mt. Sinai, we are also told it had regulations which went with it. "Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary." (Hebrews 9:1). The new covenant, which God was able to make because Jesus perfectly kept the old, brings about a change in the heart of the sinner. It is therefore far superior, able to bring about a better worship. Also, the new covenant came into force through a better sacrifice - the shedding of Christ's blood. Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor.11:25).

Some are of the belief that because they are saved through the work of Christ, and because the old covenant is obsolete (Heb. 8:13), that means the ten commandments are abolished, we do not have to keep God's moral law, however; it is the ceremonial law which has been abolished, not God's moral law. There is still a requirement upon us to keep God's moral law.

With regard to the moral law, God said, "... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." (Jer. 31:33). Jesus said, "Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:19). Quite clearly, the

moral law is important. (See also Psalm 19:7, Rom. 7:12,14, Psalm 119:165).

### The Promised Land and the New Earth

God promised to give to the descendants of Abraham a large area of land, "... To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18). God faithfully kept this promise, scripture tells us, "So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side ... Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled." (Joshua 21:43-45). See also Nehemiah 9:7-8, 22-23.

King David reigned over all of the promised land, his reign was extended to the Euphrates river after he defeated Hadadezer, king of Zobar (2 Sam. 8:3-5, 9, also 1 Chron. 18:3, 1 Kings 4:20-21).

In addition to this promise of a specific area of land for the physical descendants of Abraham, there is a promise of an everlasting possession for Abraham and all of his spiritual descendants (Gen. 17:7-8). This everlasting possession is the final dwelling place for all Christians. There is some confusion regarding our final place of habitation. Some feel that we will be living in a heaven without an earth, however there are many passages in the Bible which show us that we will be living on a renewed earth, and that heaven will surround the earth. The earth will become the focal point for the presence of God and his power. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea." (Revelation 21:1). "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying. 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them .... God himself will be with them...'" (21:3). Jesus promised "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5). A renewed earth because "... the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:21).

Abraham was promised the earth for an everlasting possession, not as a place of temporary residence. "The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien. I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you: and I will be their God." (Gen. 17:8). Another passage of Scripture shows that the whole earth is included in this promise. "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be **heir of the world**, but through the righteousness that comes by faith." (Rom. 4:13).

It must be remembered that Abraham did not receive the promise while he was on this present earth. He was like a temporary resident in the land of Canaan all the days of his life. When his wife Sarah died, he had to buy land from the Hittites so that he could bury her (Gen. 23-3-4). The Bible says of Abraham, Sarah and others "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth." (Heb. 11:13). Abraham was looking forward in faith to the new earth (Heb. 11:9-10), of which the prophet Isaiah spoke. "For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure..." (Is. 66:22). Isaiah also said, "...they will possess the land forever..." (Is. 60:21). (See also

Is. 65:17 and 2 Peter 3:13).

### God's Victory Over Satan

It is important to understand the fact that the earth will not be destroyed and forgotten, otherwise Satan would be able to claim a major victory in his rebellion against God. The very opposite is in fact true. Satan had tried to destroy man and his relationship with God. He also tried to destroy the earth - it has come under a curse - but only for a short period of time. Instead of achieving these objectives, a renewed man will enjoy an intimate relationship with God upon the renewed earth. God will dwell upon the renewed earth with his redeemed people.

### A Covenant of Love

God's covenant with Abraham is a covenant of love. It does not depend on the good deeds of Abraham or any of his descendants for its ultimate success, if that were the case, there would be no chance of any person being saved. The Bible clearly tells us that there is no righteous person upon the earth. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," (Rom. 3:23).

When Christ walked between the halves of the animals in the making of the covenant, he was walking in our place. The righteous one in place of the sinner. This covenant shows his love and determination to save us, he is in fact saying through this action. "If I do not keep the covenant, may I die". Amazingly he did this, knowing that he would in fact have to die in order to fully keep the covenant because of our sins. His love and determination is seen upon his face as he walked toward Jerusalem to go to his death on the cross. "... Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." (Luke 9:51). The O.T. saints did not trust in their own righteousness, or the righteousness of the nation, they could only take comfort from the fact that God had made a covenant with Abraham which he would never forget. A covenant which pointed to a substitute (Christ) for its faithful keeping. There are many passages of Scripture which attest to the fact that the covenant is an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten by God.

- "...I will never break my covenant with you." (Judges 2:1).
- "He remembers his covenant forever..." (1 Chron. 16:15). Also Psalm 105:8, 111:5.
- "...He ordained his covenant forever..." (Psalm 111:9).
- "...you who keep your covenant of love." (2 Chron. 6:14).
- "He remembers his covenant for ever the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an **everlasting covenant**." (Psalm 105:8-10).

The covenant is everlasting, because his love toward us is an everlasting love.

### Abraham the Father of Believers

Abraham is the spiritual father of all believers, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." (Galatians. 3:29). "...those who believe

are children of Abraham.” (3:7). See also John 8:39, Rom.2:28-29. It is in this way that Abraham understood he would have many descendants. ““In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” (Rom. 4:18).

The promise to give Abraham many descendants and a renewed earth (4:13), could not be conditional upon man's keeping the law, because under such a condition no person would be saved; so God based the promise upon his own good grace, to be received through faith. In this way he ensured that there would be many descendants. “... it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be **guaranteed to all his descendants...**” (Rom. 4:16).

The many descendants include Gentiles who were separated from the covenants of the promise, but are now included in the promise made to Abraham because of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The Bible says of the Gentile believers, “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians. 2:12-13). See also Rom. 15:8-13.

#### **God is 100% Successful**

God never fails in any task he determines to accomplish. He has revealed in the covenant with Abraham his determination to save a large company of people for himself. ““When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no-one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.’” (Hebrews 6:13-14).

God has been successful in this objective. Some Jews tried to make Jesus look like a failure by comparing him with Moses (e.g. John 9:29). It was Moses who led the whole nation of Israel out of Egypt and through the desert to the promised land. Jesus by comparison had a much smaller group of followers. To many, Christ's mission would have looked like a failure. Jesus however, does not look upon the comparatively small number following him as a sign of failure, at one point he says, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away .... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall loose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.” (John 6:37, 39). The work of God is therefore 100% successful. See also John 10:24-29.

#### **Conclusion**

God's covenant with Abraham brings about a reversal of Adam's sin in at least four areas:

- **Separation** - Man became separated from God, but through the covenant keeping Christ, believers are reunited with God.
- **Fellowship** - Because of sin, people are out of harmony with each other. Through the covenant, believers are children of Abraham; brothers and sisters in Christ.
- **Land** - The earth is under a curse. Through the covenant, it is renewed, made fit for the dwelling of God.
- **Security** - Adam broke the covenant which forbade him from eating of the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden,

thereby bringing suffering upon all of mankind. The blessings of the covenant of Abraham are secure, because they have been kept fully by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. His everlasting righteousness secures the everlasting covenant.

God's covenant with Abraham will always be for those who understand it a source of wonder and amazement. It is difficult for mortal man to comprehend the depth of the love of Christ which has motivated his actions, firstly in his walking down the path of animals which were cut in two; taking upon himself the obligations of the covenant in our place, and then dying on the cross in our place.

If you are a Christian who enters a period of suffering causing you to have some doubt about the depth of the love of God toward you, you can draw some comfort from the covenant which God made with Abraham, an everlasting covenant. A sign of his everlasting love, proven by the death of Christ on the cross for you. One day we will see that love displayed upon the face of Christ when he returns to reign with his redeemed people upon the renewed earth forever.

#### **Questions**

1. What two things which affect us did God promise to Abraham?
2. Who are the true children of Abraham?
3. Which covenant did God abolish?
4. What is the duration of the covenant with Abraham?
5. Did Abraham receive any of the promised land before he died?
6. Where will believers dwell in the age to come?

#### **Answers**

1. Many descendants and a renewed earth.
2. Those who put their faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:7).
3. The covenant made at Sinai with its "regulations for worship" (Heb.9:1).
4. It is everlasting (Ps. 105:8-10).
5. No. (Heb. 11:13).
6. Upon the renewed earth (Rev. 21:1-3).

#### **Recommended Reading**

- A.W. Pink “*The Divine Covenants*”, (Baker)  
O.P. Robertson “*The Christ of the Covenants*”, (Presbyterian & Reformed)

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