

Sabbath School Lesson #2 – Abraham: The First Missionary – 4-10 Jul 2015

Christ calls us, as He called Abraham, to be missionaries. “Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And 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 3:6-8). As our Sabbath School Lesson has given an account of the progression of Abraham’s missionary life, we will not revisit that account in this commentary, but our focus will be on the principles that help us understand the promises made to Abraham. We read these in two portions of Scripture.

The first portion is in the words of Christ: “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” “For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” (John 5:39, 46-47). The only Scriptures in the days of Christ were the books now known as the Old Testament; these testify of Christ. They were given for no other purpose. The Apostle Paul wrote that the Scriptures are able to make men “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15); and among those writings, Christ especially points out the books of Moses as revealing Him. He who reads the writings of Moses, and the entire Old Testament, with any other expectation than to find Christ, and the way of life through Him, will utterly fail of understanding them. His reading will be in vain.

The second portion is in the words of the Apostle Paul: “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, even by me and Sylvanus and Timotheus, was not yea and nay, but in Him was yea. For all the promises of God in Him are yea, and in Him are Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Corinthians 1:19-20). No promise of God has ever been given to man except through Christ. Personal faith in Christ is the one thing necessary in order to receive whatever God has promised, God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11): He offers His promises freely to everybody; but no one can have any part in them except as he receives Christ. Christ is given to all if they will but have Him.

With the above two principles in mind, we read the first account of the promise of God to Abraham. “Now the LORD had said unto Abram, 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 the families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). At the very outset we may see that this promise to Abraham was a promise in Christ. The Apostle Paul writes: “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with the faithful Abraham” (Galatians 3:8-9). From this we learn that when God said that in Abraham all the families of the earth should be blessed, He was preaching the gospel to him. The blessing that was to come upon the people of the earth through him could be enjoyed only through faith. All promises of God are by Christ.

We next consider the connection between the gospel that was preached to Abraham and the cross. The preaching of the gospel is the cross of Christ. Thus the Apostle Paul says that Christ sent him “not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect;” and then he adds that “the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:17-18). And this is but another way of saying that the cross of Christ is the gospel, for the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Now since the preaching of the gospel is the preaching of the cross of Christ (and there is no salvation by any other means), and God preached the gospel to Abraham when He said, “In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3), it is very clear that in that promise the cross of Christ was made known to Abraham, and that the promise thus made was one that could be gained only through the cross of Christ. This fact is made very clear in Galatians 3.

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might

come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:13-14). Here we have it stated in the most explicit terms that the blessing of Abraham, which was to come on all the families of the earth, was to come only through the cross of Christ. When we see the gospel of the cross of Christ in the promises of God to Abraham, and continually remember that all the promises of God are in Christ, to be enjoyed only through His cross, and that consequently they are spiritual and eternal in their nature, then the study of the promises to Abraham will be a delight and a blessing.

Next we consider the connection between the promises made to and the covenant to Abraham. Let us keep in mind this summary of the two covenants: the New Covenant is the promises of God, and the Old Covenant is the promises of the people. The two covenants are not matters of dispensation or time: they run side-by-side all through history since the fall of man. The two covenants are matters of heart conviction. It was possible for people living in Old Testament times to be under the New Covenant if they had true faith in Christ; it is possible for us living today to be under the Old Covenant if we do not understand the gospel that was preached to Abraham. Abraham was under the New Covenant when “he believed in the Lord,” and his faith “was counted unto him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). But Abraham’s descendants, coming out of Egypt 430 years later, fall into the Old Covenant when they made a promise to the Lord, “all that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). God did not ask them to make that promise; they broke it soon afterwards. In the New Testament, Peter’s promise never to deny the Lord was an Old Covenant (Mark 14:29-31).

We first find the New Covenant in Genesis 3:15 where God promised to give a Saviour who would bruise the head of Satan – God did not ask Adam and Eve to promise anything in return. The Apostle Paul cites God’s promises to Abraham as the clearest statement of the New Covenant (Galatians 3:8-18). God made seven great promises to Abraham, but He did not ask him to make any promise in return (Genesis 12:1-3) – we may list them thus: (1) I will make of thee a great nation; (2) and I will bless thee, (3) and I will make thy name great; (4) and thou shalt be a blessing; (5) and I will bless them that bless thee, (6) and curse him that curseth thee; (7) and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. God repeated and enlarged them later, still exacted no promise from Abraham (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:4-5). In Genesis 15:9-17 it shows that the New Covenant is a one-way promise. God never asks us to make promises to Him; He asks us to believe His promises to us (Genesis 15:6).

That the covenant and promise of God are one and the same thing, is clearly seen from Galatians 3:17, where it appears that to disannul the covenant would be to make void the promise. In Genesis 17 we read that God made a covenant with Abraham to give him the land of Canaan – and with it the whole world – for an everlasting possession; but Galatians 3:18 says, “God gave it to Abraham by promise.” God’s covenants with men can be nothing else than promises to them: “Who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things” (Romans 11:35-36).

After the flood God made a covenant with every beast of the earth, and with every fowl; but the beasts and the birds did not promise anything in return (Genesis 9:9-16). As they simply received the favour at the hand of God so do we. That is all we can do. We give Him ourselves, that is, nothing, and He gives us Himself, that is, everything. Whoever deals with God must deal with Him on His own terms, that is, on the basis that we have nothing and are nothing, and He has everything and is everything and gives everything. We receive by faith.

We lastly consider the connection between the promises made to Abraham and the law of God. As He gave to Abraham, what God requires of us He gives. God’s law is His promise – it must necessarily be such, because God knows that men have no power to fulfil His law. When He says, “Thou shalt not,” we may take it as His assurance that if we but trust Him He will preserve us from the sin against which He warns us. God’s law is fulfilled in us through Christ who is “able to keep you from falling, and to present *you* faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 1:24). It is not you who are to do that, which the Lord pleases, but the word of God, “it shall accomplish that which I please” (Isaiah 55:11). You are not to read the word of God and say, ‘I will do that,’ but open your heart to “the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13) and “let the word of Christ dwell in you” (Colossians 3:16) that it may accomplish the will of God in you.