

THE OATH-BOUND COVENANT

(Discourse by the Pastor Russell, Cincinnati, Ohio Convention, Feb. 23 to March 1, 1908. Starting on page 147 of the Convention Report.)

Pastor C. T. Russell preached on the subject, “Life, Death and the Hereafter, the Divine Program Set Forth in the Abrahamic Covenant”; “God’s Oath-bound Promise to Abraham, the Hope of the World.”

Pastor Russell said:

The issues of life, death and a hereafter are all in the hand or power of the Lord. He took counsel of none of us, and holds himself fully responsible, declaring that all of his purposes shall be accomplished, and that His word that has gone forth shall not return to Him void, but shall accomplish that which He pleases.—Isa. 55:10, 11.

He owed us nothing in the beginning, and will be under no obligations in the end. We are His debtors for all that is profitable or enjoyable. He is a rich King and Father, and is able and willing to do exceedingly abundantly for us, His creatures—better than we could have asked or thought. But He has His own way for doing this, which, in the end, will be seen to be the best way. “His ways are in clouds and darkness,” writes the prophet; and the poet answers, yes, “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.”

The Gift of God

Eternal life is “the gift of God” for all of His creatures who will take it on His terms and for all others He declares, “The wages of sin is death”—the blotting out of life. And who cannot see that this arrangement to destroy all who will not use life in accord with the Divine will, is really a mercy? To perpetuate life opposed to His will and law of righteousness would be a disgrace of God and an injury to the holy as well as to the unholy. God gave our race life in Adam, but, as He had foreseen, they lost it by disobedience and came under the penalty—death. As He purposed before the foundation of the world, He in due time sent His Son to be “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.” As such Jesus died—the just for the unjust, “tasting death for every man.” (Heb. 2:9). This glorious purpose God set forth to Father Abraham in His oath-bound covenant, of which the Apostle writes, our text. (Heb. 6:13-20).

In discoursing upon the promise made by God to Abraham he took for his text Hebrews 6:17-19: “God willing more abundantly to show unto His heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel confirmed it with an oath, that ... we might have strong consolation who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us ... which hope we have as an anchor to our souls both sure and steadfast.”

He said:

Only those who have strong living faith in the Almighty God and in His Son Jesus could have much interest in the words of our text. To the evolutionist these words have little meaning, as he is looking to a natural development rather than to any supervising power of God to bring the blessing which the world so greatly needs. To the higher critic the apostle's reference to God's dealings with Abraham are nonsensical, believing as he does that the statements of Genesis are without authority and were written many hundreds of years after the death of Moses.

However, some of God's true children whose eyes of understanding have not yet been opened to a clear apprehension of the divine plan of the ages may be inclined to question what interest we could possibly have in God's oath to Abraham, given more than 3,000 years ago. Such are inclined to say to themselves: "That event was helpful to Abraham, but has nothing whatever to do with us or our day." It is our hope that an examination of this covenant, which God attested with His oath, as stated in our text, may be helpful to many of the Lord's people present, enabling them to see that God has a plan in Abraham's day; that He is still working according to that plan, and that its completion will be glorious—a blessing to His creatures and an honor to Himself.

The context shows distinctly that the apostles and the early church drew comfort from the oath-bound covenant, and clearly implies that this same comfort belongs to every true Christian down to the end of this age—to every member of the body of Christ. The apostle's words imply that God's promises and oath were intended more for us than for Abraham—more for our comfort than for his. Note the apostle's words: "That by two immutable things [two unalterable things] in which it was impossible for God to lie, we [the Gospel Church] might have a strong consolation [we] who have fled for refuge [to Christ] to lay hold upon the hope set before us."

Assurance of Almighty's Oath

Doubtless Abraham and all of his family, Israel after the flesh, drew a certain amount of blessing and encouragement from this covenant or promise, and the oath of the Almighty—which double sealed it—gave double assurance of its certainty of accomplishment, but the apostle intimates in the words quoted that God's special design in giving that covenant and in the binding it solemnly with an oath, was to encourage spiritual Israel—to give us a firm foundation for faith.

God well knew that, although 3,000 years from His own standpoint would be but a brief space, "as a watch in the night," nevertheless to us the time would appear long, and the strain upon faith would be severe; hence the positive statement and the still more deliberate oath that bound it. We cannot but wonder at such descension upon the part of the great Creator—that He should condescend to give His oath on the subject.

An upright man feels that his word should be sufficient in any matter, and, therefore, would hesitate under special conditions to confirm his word with an oath. How much more might the heavenly Father have so regarded the matter. But our text explains the reason for such condescension. He was willing more abundantly to show the unchangeableness of His plan to the “heirs of the promise”—not to the world.

Our Lord Jesus was the great heir of the Abrahamic promise, and the faithful of His consecrated people of this gospel age are declared to be His joint-heirs in that promise, which is not yet fulfilled. For its fulfillment not only the church is waiting, as the bride or fellow members of the body of Christ, to be participants with the Lord in the glories implied in the promise, but additionally the whole creation (the entire human family) is groaning and travailing in pain together waiting for the great fulfillment of that oath-bound promise or covenant. (Rom. 8.)

Those who follow the apostle’s argument and realize that we as Christians are still waiting for the fulfillment of this promise, will be anxious to know what are the terms of this covenant which is the hope of the world, the hope of the church, and the object of so much solicitude and care on the part of God, in that He would promise and then back His word with His oath. We answer that every Christian should know what this promise is, since it lies at the very foundation of every Christian hope. How can this hope be an anchor to our souls in all the storms and trials and difficulties of life, in all the opposition of the world, the flesh and the adversary, if we do not know what the hope is, if we have not even recognized the promise upon which this hope is based?

God Foresaw the Present

This is the pitiable condition of many of God’s true children; for they are merely babes in Christ, using the milk of the word. They have need of the strong meat of God’s promises, as the apostle speaks of it, that they may be “strong in the Lord and the power of His might;” that they might have on the whole armor of God—helmet, breastplate, sandals, sword and shield—and be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked one—able also to help the weaker ones in this day when the adversary is assaulting the Word of God, the citadel of the truth, with various infidel arguments in the hands and mouths of those who profess to be ministers of the Word.

Need I quote the promise—the one so repeatedly referred to in the apostolic writings—the one which is the basis or anchorage of our souls? It was made to Abraham and reads thus: “In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” It was a promise for the future and not for Abraham’s own time. The world was not blessed in Abraham’s day, nor did he even have a child at the time this promise was given. Isaac did not fulfill the promise!—he was merely a type of the greater seed of Abraham who in due time would

fulfill it. Jacob and his twelve tribes, fleshly Israel, did not fulfill the promise, but still looked for a greater Messiah to fulfill it, to bless them and through them all the families of the earth.

The Apostle Paul referred to this very promise, declaring that the seed of Abraham mentioned therein is Christ. All Christians agree to this, even though they have not distinctively and properly associated it with the declarations of the promise. But the apostle makes clear to us that in saying that Christ is the seed of Abraham he had in mind not only the Lord Jesus as the head of the body, the head of the Christ, but also the overcoming saints of this gospel age as the body of Christ. This he distinctly states in many places, for instance, Gal. 3:16-29. Here he declares the matter expressly, saying: "If ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."

The "seed of Abraham" is the Gospel Church, with her head the Lord Jesus, as the apostle states, again saying: "We brethren, as Isaac was [typified by Isaac], are the children of promise." (Gal. 4:28). It follows that the seed of Abraham mentioned in the promise is not complete and will not be until the full close of the Gospel age—the harvest time of which we believe we are now in.

But what a wonderful thought is involved in this plain interpretation of the Divine word. It is big with hope for spiritual Israel, the spiritual seed, and no less it means a blessing to the natural seed, fleshly Israel, and ultimately the millennial blessings to all the families of the earth. Let us examine these three hopes: The hopes for these three classes center in this great oath-bound covenant. Let us thus obtain what the apostle tells us was the Lord's intention for us, namely, strong consolation—strong encouragement.

All through the prophecies the Lord foretold the sufferings of Christ and the glories that should follow; nevertheless the glories to follow have been granted much more space in the Divine revelation than the sufferings of the present time. The implication suggested by the apostle is, that when the glories of the future shall be realized, the trials and sufferings and difficulties of the present time will be found not worthy to be compared, but those glories and blessings have been veiled from our mental vision, and instead a great pall hangs over the future in the minds of many of the Lord's people. With some it is merely a mist of doubt and of uncertainty, with others it is the smoke of confusion, blackness and despair as they think of their own friends in connection with an eternity of torture and the probability that a large majority of those they love will spend an eternity of horror in torment. We know that these clouds and dark forebodings come to us from the dark ages, and through theological twistings handed down from time to time.

Distort Simple Language

Many of us have learned to distort the simple language of God's word in such a manner as to cause us anguish and distress. For instance "destroy," "perish," "die," "second death," "everlasting destruction," etc., terms used by the Lord to represent the ultimate complete annihilation of those who will not come into harmony with Him after a full opportunity is granted them, are interpreted to mean the reverse of what they say—life, preservation in torture, etc.

It is high time, dear friends, that we should learn that God's book is not the foundation of these horrible nightmares which have afflicted us, and which in the past hindered many of us from a proper love and reverence of our Creator. It is high time that we should take the explanation which the apostle gives us of this matter and of all the errors which assail poor humanity respecting the future. He says: "The God of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not—lest the glorious light of the goodness of God as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord, should shine into their hearts." (2 Cor. 4:4.) We cannot here and now discuss this subject, but have provided, in the hands of the ushers, some free pamphlets on "What say the Scriptures about Hell?" Should the supply prove insufficient drop me a postal card and I will cheerfully send from Allegheny what will satisfy both your head and your heart.

Now, what hope and interest has the church of Christ in this promise made to Abraham? To us belongs the very cream of the promise, "the riches of God's grace." The promise implies the greatness of the seed of Abraham—which seed is Christ and the overcoming church. This greatness is so wonderful as to be almost beyond human comprehension. The overcomers of this gospel age, who "make their calling and election sure" in Christ, are to be joint heirs with Him in the glorious Millennial Kingdom which is to be God's agency or channel for bringing about the promised blessings—the blessings of all the families of the earth.

The great blessing of forgiveness of sins which are past and even the blessing of being awakened from the sleep of death would profit mankind but little if the arrangements of that future time—the millennial age—were not on such a scale as to permit a thorough recovery from present mental, moral and physical weakness. Hence we are rejoiced to learn that in that time Satan will be bound, every evil influence and every unfavorable condition will be brought under restraint and the favor of God through the knowledge of God will be let loose among the people—"the knowledge of our Lord shall fill the whole earth as the waters cover the great deep." Blessing, aye, favor upon favor, blessing upon blessings is the Lord's arrangement and provision. All shall know Him from the least unto the greatest and none shall need to say to his neighbor or brother, "Know thou the Lord?" (Isa. 11:9; Jer. 31:34.)

The prophets spoke repeatedly of these blessings due to the world in the future. Mark how Joel tells that, as during this Gospel age, the Lord pours out His spirit upon His

servants and handmaidens, so after these days, in the millennial age, He will pour out His spirit upon all flesh. There will be world-wide blessing through the knowledge of the truth. Mark how Moses, the prophet, spoke of these coming blessings and told how God would raise up a greater lawgiver than Himself, a greater teacher, a better mediator and under the better covenant of the Lord would bring blessings worldwide. Mark how again He represents the atonements for the sins of the whole world in Atonement Day sacrificial arrangements. Mark how again He typically foretold the blessings of the millennial age, representing it in Israel's "Year of Jubilee," in which every man went free and every possession was returned to its original ownership, thus representing the blessings of the future, man's release from servitude to sin, to Satan and the return to Him of all that was lost through Adam. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah, have spoken of these coming times so that the apostle Peter, pointing to the future, could truthfully declare that the coming times of restitution of all things have been spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began. (Acts 3:19-21.)

Hope For Jews and Others

The second class to be blessed under this Abrahamic covenant is fleshly Israel. We are not forgetting that the Jews were a rebellious and stiff-necked people; that they slew the prophets and stoned the Lord's ministers and caused the crucifixion of our Redeemer. Nevertheless the Scriptures clearly hold forth that after they have had a period of chastisement, which they have been undergoing as a nation since the Lord's crucifixion and after spiritual Israel shall have been glorified in the kingdom, then a blessing from the Lord will come upon natural Israel; they shall be saved or recovered from their blindness, and, as the prophet declares, they shall look upon Him whom they have pierced and mourn for Him because the eyes of their understanding shall be opened. We rejoice, too, that the promise is clear and distinct that the Lord will pour upon them the "spirit of prayer and of supplication." (Zech. 12:10.) See Also Romans 11:25-33.

But if God is to have mercy upon the natural Israelite, whom He declares to have been stiff-necked and hard-hearted and rebellious, would it surprise us that the divine, benevolent intention should be to bless others than the Jews—others who had not in the past the favors and privileges of this favored nation, and whose course, therefore, was less in opposition to the light? It should not surprise us, and so we find in this great oath-bound covenant a blessing for all nations—all peoples.

Let us look at the promise again—remembering that our Heavenly Father made it deliberately, and subsequently bound Himself to its provisions by an oath, so that we might not only be sure that He could not break His word, but doubly sure that He could not break His oath, and that therefore, without peradventure, this promise shall be fulfilled. It reads: "In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." What is the blessing so greatly needed by all mankind? We answer, it is the very blessing that Jesus

declared He came to give, saying: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

Ah, yes. Life! Life! It is life that the whole world needs, and our Lord Jesus declares Himself to be the great Life Giver. Indeed, in the Syriatic language, in which probably our Lord discoursed, the word life giver is the equivalent to our word savior. Jesus came to save man—from sin and from the penalty of sin—namely, death. It is a human invention of the dark ages to attach eternal torment as the penalty of sin; it is the divine arrangement to attach to a sin a reasonable and just but an awful penalty—death. It is because we are sinners that we are all dying creatures, and for the Lord to give life implies that He will take away the sin and all necessity for its penalty.

Poor, Imperfect Creatures

“We make God’s love too narrow; By false standards of our own.” It is time for us to wake up to the fact that we are not better than our God, but that we are poor, imperfect creatures of the dust, fallen by nature, and that it is time for us to stop misconstruing the divine character and plan as against His creatures, and to hearken to the Lord’s own word when He declares, “Their fear toward Me is not of Me, but is taught by the precepts of men.” It is time for us to be praying for ourselves and for each other, as the apostle prayed for some, saying: “I pray God for you that the eyes of your understanding may be opened, that ye may be able to comprehend with all saints the lengths and breadths and heights and depths—to know the love of God which surpasseth all understanding.” (Eph. 1:18; 3:18, 19).

Do not misapprehend us. We are not teaching that heathen and imbeciles and the unregenerate in general shall be taken to heaven, where they would be utterly out of harmony with their surroundings and require to be converted and to be taught. Such an inconsistent view we leave to those who are now claiming that the heathen will be saved in their ignorance. We stand by the Word of God, that there is no present salvation without faith in Christ Jesus, and hence that the heathen and the imbeciles have neither part nor lot in the salvation in the present time. We stand by the Scriptures, which declare that any who are saved in the present time must walk in the narrow way, of which the dear Redeemer says they be few that find it. We stand by the Scriptures which say that salvation at the present time is only for the little flock who, through much tribulation, shall enter the kingdom. We stand by the Scriptures, which say that this kingdom class now being developed is the seed of Abraham under the Lord, their head, their elder brother, the bridegroom. We stand by the Scriptures, which say that through this Christ, when complete, a blessing shall extend to every member of Adam’s race—the blessing of opportunity to know the Lord, to understand the advantages of righteousness, the opportunity of choosing obedience and by obedience obtaining everlasting life.

The blessings of the future will be of such a kind that every individual who does not have his full opportunity in this present life will have it then. Not an opportunity to become members of the “seed of Abraham,” not an opportunity to have part in the great “change” from human nature to divine nature, not an opportunity to sit with the Lord in His throne; but an opportunity to become members of the “seed of Abraham,” everlasting life under human, earthly, paradisiacal conditions; an opportunity of coming again into the divine likeness, almost obliterated in the human family through the 6,000 years of the fall. This period, in which this opportunity will be granted to man, is in the Scriptures termed the day of judgment—a thousand-year day—the millennial day. It will be a day of trial, a day of testing, a day of proving the world to see whether with a full knowledge of God and of righteousness, which He requires, they will choose it in preference to sin, choose life in preference to the second death.

Thank God for that wonderful judgment, the trial day for the world secured for all through the precious blood of Christ. “When the judgments of the Lord are abroad in the earth the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.” (Isa. 26:9.)