

# *One Covenant,*

  

# *One People*

© John Hooper  
2006

***Therefore, the same covenant which [God] entered into with Israel  
He has in these latter days entered into with us,  
that we may be one people with them, one church,  
and may also have one covenant.***

(Ulrich Zwingli; *Dialogue With Grebel's Ghost*; 1527)

## *1. Christ in the Shadows*

### **An everlasting covenant**

The Bible, as we well know, is composed of two testaments, or *covenants*. Within the old testament further divisions can be distinguished, corresponding to the "covenants" which God established at various times with His people.

For example, Scripture speaks of God establishing His covenant with successive patriarchs. He declares to Abraham: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee,

and to thy seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7). God goes on to promise Abraham and Sarah a son saying, "I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him" (vs. 19).

Many years later we hear David, King of Israel, speaking from his death bed: "[God] hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure" (II Sam. 23:5; cf. Ps 89:28, 29).

In Ezekiel 16:60-62 God promises His people, at that time held captive in Babylon, "I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant".

In each of these passages we are told that God establishes an everlasting covenant. Now by its very definition an everlasting covenant must be an unending and unbreakable covenant. But if God had had to annul His covenant with Abraham in order to make a new one with Isaac, or with David, then the earlier covenant would not have been everlasting and God would have broken His word, which is impossible.

These various covenants were not broken. Nor were they distinct everlasting covenants running through history in parallel, but stages of the one covenant which God revealed to and established with successive generations of His people.

God speaks of *remembering* His covenant, as in the passage from Ezekiel. The everlasting covenant which He goes on to promise Israel in that passage is not an additional covenant, but a new revelation of the one covenant which He had made with them in the days of their youth. (See also Ps. 105:8).

An everlasting covenant cannot be broken, revoked, discarded, superseded, or replaced (see Ps. 89:34; Jer. 33: 19-21). It can, however, be given (Num. 25:12; Acts 7:8:), declared (Deut. 4:13), made (Ps. 105:9), confirmed (Ps. 105:10), remembered (Ex. 2:4; Lev. 26: 42; Ps. 105:8; Ezek. 16:60; Lk. 1:72), and kept (I Kings 8:23; Neh. 9: 32).

It is most striking how often God uses the expression "my covenant", as if to emphasize the point that there is only one covenant, and that is *His* covenant.

It must be stressed, moreover, that God *always* speaks of the covenant as His own, while His people in their turn refer to it as "thy covenant". Nowhere on the pages of Holy Writ do we ever find the expression "our covenant". This confirms the unilateral nature of the covenant of grace, in distinction from the bi-lateral, contractual form of human covenants.

In sharp contrast to the 300 odd Scriptural occurrences of the word "covenant", the plural form "covenants" is found just three times (Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:24; Eph. 2:12). From God's perspective there is but one everlasting covenant. In the administration of that covenant

through history, however, we can discern various stages of development. From the human perspective there has been a gradual unfolding, or progressive revelation of the covenant to the accommodation of man's understanding. It is in this sense, and in this sense alone, that the Scriptures speak as though there have been a number of covenants.

Between all the "covenants" of the old testament, such as with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David, there is perfect harmony. We dare not bring them into conflict because, essentially, there is just one covenant of grace which God has established in eternity with His people through the only Mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. It is called in Scripture "the everlasting covenant" (Heb. 13: 20).

But what of the new covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31 and fulfilled in the new dispensation (Heb. 8:8)? Does not the word "new" indicate something completely different, something hitherto unknown? In every-day usage "new" certainly has that connotation.

What we find in the new covenant, however, is the final stage in that progressive unfolding before men to which we have referred. It is the last revelation of the covenant, and also the fullest revelation that we shall know on earth. In essence it is no different from the "covenants" that went before it. For instance, the covenant formula, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people", repeated so often throughout the old testament, is invoked again in the new (II Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10); the law written on the fleshy tables of the heart is the same law as that written before on tables of stone (II Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10); the Lord who is known in the new covenant is the same Lord as was known in the old covenant, only now directly and without the need for earthly priests and mediators (Heb. 8:11).

But in its *administration* the new covenant demonstrates one major distinction from the old. As Calvin tells us in his *Institutes*, "The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation" (Book II; Chap. X; Para. 2).

## **Types and shadows**

Throughout the old covenant age the truths of the gospel were revealed in typical form. This was the old covenant "mode of dispensation". The people of God understood the gospel only through the temporal earthly types and figures of sacrifices, ceremonies, feast days, the Levitical priesthood, and so on. To use a more biblical term, the gospel was revealed to them in *shadows*: "there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: who serve unto the

example and *shadow of heavenly things*" (Heb. 8:5; cf. Col. 2:17).

When the fulness of the time was come, however, and God sent forth His Son, the "mode of dispensation" changed. The types and shadows fled away as being no longer necessary because in Christ they had all been fulfilled. God's people no longer lived in the shadows but in the full and glorious light of gospel truth. The covenant was made *new*.

In our desire to emphasize the differences between the old and new covenants, and in particular the superiority of the new, we should never lose sight of their basic unity. One writer has put it like this: "Every inspired writer who spoke in the Scriptures of *old* and *new* covenants could well have added the words of Paul, 'I speak after the manner of men...'" (Rom. 6:19). For in God's sight there has always been but one eternal plan, which he has unfolded through a progressive revelation to man" (W E Cox; *Biblical Studies in Final Things*, p. 4).

Fallen man's nature and needs are always the same, as also are God's dealings with him. Sinners must be ingrafted into Christ, justified, born again, and reconciled to God. In themselves the types and shadows of the old covenant could do none of these things, "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect" (Heb. 10:1). But God's old covenant people were saved nonetheless.

Just as it is not possible to have the shadow of an object without the object itself being close at hand, so all the old covenant shadows of good things to come owed their existence and efficacy to the presence of the spiritual reality. The saints of those days could only see the reality from afar in the shadows it cast, but the *power* of the reality was still there, and it was the power of their salvation.

They were saved by the same gospel, by the same Reality as has saved us, and that Reality is Christ. Although they lived many generations before Christ and looked forward to His coming, the old covenant saints were not saved by the fleeting earthly shadows, nor were they saved even by their hope for Christ's coming, but by Christ Himself, through faith.

In Exodus 17 we read the account of the children of Israel in Horeb having their thirst quenched, and their weary bodies revived, by water miraculously brought forth by Moses from a rock. That smitten rock, we learn from the new testament, was a type of Christ, the fountain of living waters. As a type, however, it did more than simply to point forward to the coming Saviour. Says Paul, "our fathers... did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock *was Christ*" (I Cor. 10:4).

The spiritual blessings of salvation which the believing Israelite experienced in his

wilderness wanderings, the refreshment of soul he underwent, did not come from physical rocks nor the waters that flowed from them, the shadows, but from Christ, the reality. The manna too, which was sent down from heaven to feed him, was essentially "*spiritual* meat" (I Cor. 10:3).

Being saved by Christ, the old covenant saints also consciously lived by Christ and testified of Him. Moses esteemed "the reproach of *Christ* greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (Heb. 11:26). He and all the prophets spoke of *Christ* (Luke 24:27), and testified of Him in the Scriptures (John 5:39), to the extent that the Old Testament scriptures were able to make a man "wise unto salvation through *faith which is in Christ Jesus*" (II Tim. 3:15). The apostle Paul, in Romans 10:8, having quoted Deuteuronomy 30:13 and 14, describes the word of God of both old and new testaments as "the word of faith".

So while the form of administration differs markedly between the two dispensations, what is administered is the same - the one covenant of grace. And that covenant is *spiritual*.

A W Pink, in his book *Practical Christianity*, writes, 'The principle difference between the Mosaic and Christian dispensations was neither in "the way of salvation", the spiritual portion of God's children, nor the principles of His government; but rather that spiritual things were presented to their view largely under types and shadows, whereas we have the substance itself openly set before us. Beneath all the trivial contrasts there is a fundamental unity between them, and it betrays a very superficial mind which delights in magnifying those contrasts, while ignoring or denying their basic oneness.... There is far more of essential oneness between the administration of those two economies than there was incidental divergencies, as Calvin long ago demonstrated in his *Institutes*.'

How right Calvin and Pink were!

## **A spiritual covenant**

The spiritual nature of the covenant and its promises is demonstrated by the example of Abraham. Abraham had no interest in the land of Canaan *in itself*, because he recognized that that piece of earthly ground was only a figure. The promise of God to him had included "all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8), but the only parcel of land he ever possessed was a burial plot for Sarah, his wife. And that he had to buy! As for the rest, he "not so much as set his foot on" it (Acts 7:5). This does not mean that the promise has been broken, or that it still awaits its earthly fulfilment, but that Abraham sojourned in the

land of promise "as in a strange country... For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:9,10; cf. Gen. 23:4).

In contrast, there were many Jews throughout the old testament age, one may even say the majority, for whom the land was their only concern. They had a carnal, nationalistic concept of the covenant and the covenant promises so that to them the land itself was the blessing, the fulfilment of those promises. They could conceive of no more about the covenant than what they could see with their eyes and walk upon with their feet.

The proud boast of the idolatrous Jews who remained behind in Jerusalem during the Babylonian captivity was, "unto us is the land given in possession". They were still in "the land", they were still in Jerusalem, and they still had the the temple, albeit now in ruins, and that was all that mattered to them, even though the glory of God had departed and was far away with the captives in Babylon. (Compare Ex. 25:8 with Ezek. 11:16 and John 4:21-24).

The unbelieving Jews of new testament times held the same carnal view, as did some even among the Lord's own followers. The two on the road to Emmaus, for example, had trusted that Jesus of Nazareth "had been he which should have redeemed Israel" (Luke 24:21). The disciples too, on the Mount of Olives, asked Jesus, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They were still clinging to the idea that Jesus had come to overthrow the Romans, clear them out of the land and establish an earthly kingdom clothed with glory like that of the kingdom of David and Solomon, but they were wrong. They were labouring under a delusion and the Lord now seeks to correct that delusion. Central to His reply is His making plain to them that the kingdom is not earthly but spiritual. He says, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth" (v. 8). It is a spiritual kingdom that is established by the preaching of the *gospel*, and that not only in Palestine but throughout the world! Calvin writes that the disciples "have no cause therefore to dream of wealth, luxury, power in the world or any other earthly thing when they hear that Christ is reigning when He subdues the world to Himself by the preaching of the Gospel. It follows from this that His reign is spiritual and not after the pattern of the world" (*Comm. on Acts*). After the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost the disciples finally understood this and one searches in vain for any further mention by them of an earthly kingdom.

But still today many Christians labour under the same old delusion. Failing to understand fully the typical character of the old covenant they have the same carnal, nationalistic view of its promises as did the disciples before the coming of the Spirit. To them the covenant is

an earthly covenant for an earthly people, promising earthly blessings in an earthly land.

Abraham knew far better. In the age of earthly shadows, "Abraham", said Christ, "rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). He knew that the covenant was spiritual and its blessings were heavenly. He knew the "land" to be a place in which to dwell in tents, yet speaking of a better country, an eternal, heavenly land to be entered into after death. And Abraham lived in the old dispensation!

Indeed, it was true of all the old testament saints that they "died in faith, not having received the promises, but having *seen them afar off*, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were *strangers and pilgrims on the earth*. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now *they desire a better country*, that is, an *heavenly*: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for *he hath prepared for them a city*" (Heb. 11:13-16).

The covenant that God establishes with us is the same covenant which He established so long ago with Abraham. We who, by the same grace of the same God, have been called out from among the Gentiles to believe in the same Saviour, rejoice with Abraham in the same covenant blessings, in fulfilment of the promise made to him that he would be the father of *many* nations. Indeed, in him "shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Hence many, we are told, "shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11).

At the close of Hebrews 11, having catalogued some of the giants of the faith in the old testament, the apostle writes, "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (vs. 39,40). The old covenant saints died "not having received the promises" (vs. 13). They could not reach 'perfection' because the promises were not fulfilled. In our time fulfilment has come, God having provided for us "better things", so that now the old covenant saints are made perfect *with us*, not without us.

## **One salvation**

In the sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood we see again events that, in themselves, were without substance. They were merely shadows. The rivers of blood from the innumerable goats, bulls and other animals slain on Jewish altars, could not remit a single sin. This again

opens up the question of how the old covenant saints were saved. The answer once more is that they were saved by the reality, the one sacrifice for sin that was to be made on Calvary (cf. Heb. 9:1-14). We should remember that in the decrees of God the reality, i.e., *the Lamb*, was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

The essence of both covenants is salvation by grace, through faith, in the shed blood of the one sacrifice for sins, Jesus Christ the Righteous. He is the Saviour in both dispensations, the same yesterday, today, and for ever, purchasing for old covenant saints the same blessings that He has purchased for new covenant saints. To question this is to raise a challenge against Christ's exclusive claim to be the way, the *only* way. "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me", He says (John 14:6). He is the Mediator, the *only* Mediator between God and men, of whom Moses was but a temporal, earthly shadow (Deut. 18:15; I Tim. 2:5; cf. Num. 11:12-15).

Circumcision too was only a shadow, the reality being close by. The spiritual Israelite knew that mere circumcision of his flesh availed him nothing. It could never make him a real Jew, as God had revealed to Moses: "And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine *heart*, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live" (Deut. 30:6). Again and again God rebuked impenitent Israelites for their uncircumcised hearts (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; cf. Acts 7:51).

Circumcision of the heart, the new testament tells us, is regeneration; it is to be quickened together with Christ (Col. 2:13). Like us, old testament sinners needed to be born again, regenerated, raised from their spiritual death and made new creatures in Christ. That there is nothing new about the new birth is clear from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Having heard from the Lord's lips that he must be born again, Nicodemus asks, "How can these things be?" But Jesus shames him by replying, "Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not these things?" (John 3:9,10). From his familiarity with the old testament scriptures he should have known better.

In their respective dispensations both circumcision and baptism are external signs of the same inner spiritual reality, namely regeneration, and this adds further testimony to the truth of the unity of the covenant (see Rom. 4:11; Col. 2: 10-13; Gal. 3:27).

## **One covenant people**

If we were to deny that the reality of the gospel existed in the shadows of the old covenant,

then either Jews were not saved or they were saved in a way fundamentally different from that in which we are saved in the new covenant age. Or again, salvation itself meant something very different to what we understand by it today. If any one of these options is true, then God has two distinct peoples, Israel and the church; and many believe that to be the case. But the Bible maintains that God has only *one* people, the church of Jesus Christ built on the one foundation of "the apostles *and prophets*" (Eph. 2:20). The Good Shepherd has only one fold (John 10:16).

It is instructive to note that terms used by the Holy Spirit to denote the people of God of the old covenant are used for those of the new covenant too, and *vice versa*. On the one hand, Stephen, in his defense before the high priest, calls the children of Israel at Sinai "the *church* [*ekklesia*] in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38). On the other hand, the new testament writers use names and descriptions for the church which long time previously had been used only for Israel. Hence, the church is called "mount Sion", "the city of the living God", "the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21:2; 10). She is the "holy nation" (I Pet. 2:9; cf. Deut 26:19), the "vine" (John 15:1-6; cf. Ps 80; Isa. 5:1-7), the "bride of God" (II Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:32; cf. Isa. 54:5,6; Ezek. 16:32). She is, in fact, "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). Her members are "the children of Abraham" (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7, 29; cf. Isa. 41:8); they are "the Jews" (Rom. 2:29), "the circumcision" (Phil. 3:3).

From this freely interchangeable use of names, together with all the other evidence we have accumulated and presented in this chapter, we conclude and vigorously maintain that Israel is the church of the old testament, and that the church of the new testament is the true Israel of God. Together they constitute God's one covenant people.

## *2. Prophecy and the Church*

Crucial to a proper understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church is our interpretation of old testament prophecy. What do the prophets say about the church?

There are some who would have us believe that the prophets say nothing at all about the church, even that the church was unknown to the prophets, despite Peter's assertion that they foretold of '*these days*' in which he was living (Acts 3:24). We are told that the church age

is an interruption in God's overall plan and purpose, a purpose which has always centred on the physical, national Israel.

According to this interpretation, known as Dispensationalism, 'The church thus becomes a parenthesis between the historical kingdom of David and his successors, which is long past, and the Davidic kingdom of the future which is to constitute the literal fulfilment of the kingdom prophecies regarding Israel in an age which will be introduced after the church has been removed.' (O T Allis; *Prophecy and the Church*; p. 54).

This kind of interpretation creates a sharp distinction between the church and Israel. It maintains that God has not one peculiar people, but two.

In this chapter of our study we will take a look at three old testament prophecies and see whether this is really true, taking particular notice of how these prophecies are interpreted by the Scriptures themselves.

## **The house of David**

In Amos 9:11-15 we find the following most graphic word of prophecy:

"In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God." (v. 11,12).

What can all of this mean?

On the face of it, the passage is predicting a literal restoration of Israel to the land of Canaan. It is telling us that at some future time the royal house, or tabernacle, of David is to be revived. Though long lain in dishonour and disrepute, it will be built up again as scattered

Jews from across the world converge on the land promised to their fathers, there to enjoy unprecedented material prosperity in fulfilment of God's covenant promises.

On the face of it, such a natural, national fulfilment of Amos' prophecy looks indisputable. Why should we even think of questioning it? After all, is it not the literal and apparently most straightforward interpretation? Is it not the plain meaning of the text?

There is one very good, over-riding reason why we should not only question such an interpretation, but abandon it entirely: it is not the interpretation that God Himself has given us in His Word, as we shall now see. In Acts 15 this prophecy is quoted by James during his speech to the Jerusalem council, a gathering of apostles and elders convened to discuss the question of whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised. Did they have to become Jews, as they did in old testament times?

Peter, speaking first, declares how God had not only revealed to him that uncircumcised Gentile believers should be accepted as they are, but confirmed it by giving them the Holy Ghost. Paul and Barnabas add their support to this argument.

At this point James, brother of our Lord and elder in the church at Jerusalem, calls for the attention of the assembly: "Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things" (13-17).

So James turns to "the words of the prophets" to find support for the case put forward by the other speakers. In particular he turns to the very prophecy in Amos which we have been considering, and in so doing he identifies its fulfilment not in the restoration of national Israel, but in the salvation of the Gentiles and the building of the church of the new dispensation.

The house of David, which was fallen and ruined, shall most certainly be built up again, but it will be accomplished in a manner and to a glory far exceeding anything known under the old dispensation or envisaged by Dispensationalism. It will be accomplished through the visitation of God upon the Gentiles, from whom He shall take out a people for His name and add them to His family.

The gathering of the Gentiles into the people of God, as had been witnessed by the judaizers of Antioch, was precisely what the prophets had foretold. Far from being a departure from God's revealed purpose this was the very fulfilment of that purpose. The

church, and the church alone, has been central to God's purpose from the very beginning.

The middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile must fall down. The distinctions must be removed, all the distinguishing ceremonies, such as circumcision, must be abrogated, so that Jew and Gentile shall be one people, one church, in Christ.

Crucially, the "house of David" which was old testament Israel, and the "house of David" which is the new testament church, are identified by James as being one and the same. The house that fell to ruins and the house that is built up again is the same house. And far from being an earthly, nationalistic house, it is a spiritual house, made up of all who call upon the name of the Lord, whether Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, old testament or new testament.

The kingdom raised up under Christ, great David's greater Son, is the same kingdom as of old, yet with its borders extended to "the remnant of Edom, and all the heathen". It is a kingdom not restored to the original order of things, but with a glory raised up "even to the heavens" (Calvin), where, with all power and glory given to Him, the King sits enthroned in everlasting splendour at the Father's side, and with the key of David in his hand (cp. Isa, 22:22 with Rev. 3:7).

Loosed of the carnality that bound it during the days of types and shadows, the kingdom is now revealed to us as the spiritual kingdom it really is: a kingdom that is not of this world. It "cometh not with observation"; it is "not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost", (John 18:36; Luke 17:20,21; Rom. 14:17). Even as foretold by the prophet, her walls and bulwarks are Salvation and her gates are Praise (Isa. 60:18; 26:1).

These are the blessings, the "sure mercies", promised to David when God called him from the sheepfold and established with him His everlasting covenant of grace (II Sam. 7:8-16; Ps. 89). That covenant and its blessings are ours; the covenant is the same covenant. God's people are one people.

The kingdom is not some future millennial pipe-dream for the Jews, it is here and now. We saw in the previous chapter that scripture describes the church as a "city" and a "nation", in other words she is a spiritual commonwealth of saints. Her government is a monarchy, meaning she is a *kingdom*, ruled by her own king with her own laws, customs, and language. Her king is the Lord Jesus Christ who, when he had by Himself purged our sins, "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3), and He governs by His word and Spirit. We are the citizens of that kingdom. God has delivered us from the power of darkness and "translated us into *the kingdom of his dear Son*: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Col.1:13). This verse explains too the only way of entry

into the kingdom: it is through the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ. The keys to unlock this door of the kingdom to outsiders are the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of Christian discipline (Matt. 16:19; 18:15-20), and these keys are entrusted into the hands of the kingdom's very own officers (Matt. 16:19). Moreover it is a kingdom which is not restricted to the Jews but is open to all nations, tribes and tongues, enabling Colossians too to be "translated into the kingdom". As citizens of the kingdom we submit to the laws of our King and keep the holy ordinances He has given to His church.

## **My people, beloved**

For our second passage from the prophets we go to the book of Hosea.

Israel had proved herself to be an adulterous wife to God, bringing forth children of whoredoms, children whom God names Lo-ruhamah, or "not beloved; not the objects of mercy", and Lo-ammi, or "not my people". But despite Israel's unfaithfulness God does not, cannot even, forget the covenant which He has made with her: "it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God..." (1:10,11). Later He says, "...and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God" (2:23).

God shows mercy toward those who were not His people, so that Lo-ruhamah becomes Ruhamah, "beloved", and Lo-ammi becomes Ammi, "my people".

What do we have here? Do we have a promise of future blessing for Israel as a nation, the restoration of Divine favour toward the ten tribes? Once again a casual reading of the passage may lead us to such a literal interpretation. But we have already discovered that we should not read old testament prophecy in isolation from the new.

Turning to the new testament we find these very same prophetic words of the old covenant prophet quoted by Paul in Romans 9:25,26. He is dealing there with the question of divine sovereignty and answering the objection posed in verse 19, that if God is sovereign, having mercy on whom He wills and hardening whom He wills, "Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" In response Paul speaks of God's sovereign right and prerogative, not only to display his power in vessels of wrath, but also to make known the riches of His glory in "vessels of mercy, afore prepared unto glory" (vs. 23).

These vessels of mercy, Paul goes on to say, are called out not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles, precisely as foretold in the old dispensation: "As he saith also in

Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God". (See also I Pet. 2:10).

-240-360 The apostle is teaching us here that the fulfilment of Hosea's prophecy is not to be found in the restoration of earthly Israel as a nation, but in the gathering of the church out of all peoples, Gentile as well as Jewish, in the new dispensation.

We should remember too that in these verses Paul is still explaining and substantiating the statement he made in verse 6, that although Israel was now rejected as a nation, and although many of Paul's "kinsmen according to the flesh" were not saved, the word of God had not become of none effect. The word of God had not failed; His promises had not become void. On the contrary, the word was being most richly fulfilled in the calling of vessels of mercy from both Jew and Gentile alike.

In this new dispensation the Jews, in their relationship to God, have become Lo-ruhama and Lo-ammi, neither the people of God nor beloved, thus putting them on a par with the Gentiles. There is now no difference between them for all nations are alike in the sight of God. The playing-field is level, if you like.

But even as this is true, so it is also true that God has vessels of mercy, as much among the Jews as among the Gentiles; and by His gracious, effectual, saving call among Jews and Gentiles alike Lo-Ruhama become Ruhama, "beloved", and Lo-ammi become Ammi, "my people". Throughout the ages God always has a people of whom He says, "I will be their God, and they shall be *my people*".

No, the word of God has not become of none effect. Jews are saved, but they are saved in the same manner as Gentiles, by the same Saviour as Gentiles, and to the same end as Gentiles, and together they make up the one people of God.

From Paul's application of Hosea's prophecy we can see that the Israel whose restoration is so vividly foretold, and whose seed would be as the sand of the sea, is an Israel composed of not only Jews, but also of Gentiles. And that Israel is the new testament church, which together with the old testament church make up the one body of Christ.

## **A better covenant**

Finally, in Jeremiah 31:31-34 we are told of the "new covenant" that God will make with the house of Israel and Judah; a covenant in which God will write His law in their hearts "and will be their God, and they shall be my people".

Here again the promise would appear to be for earthly Israel, assuring her of a future blessing from God. But is that true? In the Hebrew letter we discover that the house of Israel in Jeremiah 31 does not refer to national Israel at all but to the new testament church, in which the prophecy finds its fulfilment. Even now Christ is the Mediator of that "better covenant" of which the prophet spoke (cf. 8:6-13 and 10:14-18), while in II Corinthians 3, again with reference to Jeremiah 31, Paul declared himself to be a minister of this new covenant (vs. 3-6).

The new covenant is a *better* covenant. It is established on better promises, and has brought in a better hope, even a better and enduring substance, through better sacrifices (Heb. 8:6, 7:19, 10:34, 9:23). Does this mean that none of these things had been revealed under the old covenant? No, simply that now they are revealed *better*. Prophecy has given way to fulfilment, types have made way for reality, and shadows for substance. The new covenant, therefore, is not a different or separate covenant from the old, but is its final and complete revelation.

The law written on tablets of stone in the old covenant and the law now written on the fleshy tables of our hearts is the *same* law, a law which in Deuteronomy 4:13 is identified with the covenant itself.

Moreover, the Lord who is known in the covenant is the same Lord in both dispensations, the difference being that now we know Him directly, without the need for earthly priests and mediators (cf. Mal. 2:6,7). This is what is foretold in the prophets: "And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour... saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me" (Jer. 31:34); "And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD" (Isaiah 54:13).

## **Scripture interprets Scripture**

Prophecies like the three we have considered, and their new testament fulfilment, could easily be multiplied. For example, compare Isaiah 28:16 with Ephesians 2:20 and I Peter 2:6; Isaiah 49:8 with II Corinthians 6:2; Isaiah 61 with Luke 4:16-21; Joel 2:28-32 with Acts 2:16-21 and Romans 10:13.

In fact, we find here a general principle that should always govern our interpretation of such passages. Prophecies speaking of future blessing for the nation of Israel find their fulfilment in this new dispensation in which we are living today, as God gathers His church from out of every nation, tribe, and tongue.

Only on the basis of the unity of the covenant, and the unity of the church of both the old and new dispensations could such interpretation of prophecy be made. If the apostles can refer to prophetic utterances concerning old testament Israel and apply them so readily to the new testament church, then Israel and the church must be one and the same entity.

Interpretations of old testament prophetic Scripture that look to a future, earthly, Judaistic fulfilment, stem from the fundamental but mistaken premise that God has two peoples, Israel and the church, each with their distinct purpose and future. Only by putting such ideas out of our minds and yielding to inspired Scripture, letting Scripture interpret itself, can we appreciate the glorious truth that God has one covenant and one people, one church to whom all the promises pertain.

The Bible knows only one covenant and only one people of God through all ages. And while the shadows of the old dispensation are gone, the realities remain with us for always, ever the same. Hence Jerusalem is not destroyed, only its shadow. Mount Zion is not gone, only its shadow; the temple is not fallen; neither the altar, nor the priesthood and sacrifices have been abolished, only their shadows. Neither is the land of Canaan forgotten, either by our covenant keeping God or by His church, only the shadow. And the reason for all this is that now in the new, present dispensation the types and shadows find their realization and fulfilment.

But perhaps someone asks, What is Jerusalem if it is not a city in Palestine? What is Mount Zion if not the mountain of God? The answer of the inspired Scriptures is, "But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and *church of the firstborn*, which are written in heaven..." (12:22).

The word of God in the old covenant was that He would "lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation" (Isa. 28:16). That stone is Christ (Rom. 9:33; I Pet. 2:6). And where does God lay this corner stone? He lays it in the church. Paul writes to "the household of God" in Ephesus telling them, "And ye are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the *chief corner stone*" (Eph. 19,29). So, what is Zion? It is the church! *We* are Zion!

Or again, through Moses God spoke to the children of Israel from mount Sinai, saying to them, 'ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation' (Ex. 19:5,6). Where do we find the fulfilment of those promises? We find it where Peter does, in those who believe in Jesus and to whom He is precious for he says, 'ye are a chosen generation, a royal

priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people' (I Pet. 2:9). The holy nation of which God spoke from the mount is no less than the church of Jesus Christ, a church comprised of Gentiles even, a people 'which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy' (I Pet. 2:10).

This kind of biblical interpretation is often criticized. It is condemned as "spiritualizing" the old testament, and "reading the new testament into the old". But what better precedent could we possibly want than the new testament itself, and what better interpreter than the Holy Spirit? These are not the interpretations of men that we have been looking at: this is inspired Scripture! The Holy Spirit has not only given us the prophecies, but He has also given us His authoritative interpretation. As one writer has put it:

'The New Testament views itself... as the spiritual and therefore complete and authentic fulfilment of the Old Testament. The spiritualization of the Old Testament, rightly understood, is not an invention of Christian theology but has its beginning in the New Testament itself. The Old Testament in spiritualized form, is the New Testament. The peculiar nature of the old dispensation consisted precisely in the fact that the covenant of grace was presented in graphic images and clothed in national and sensuous forms... In keeping with Israel's level of understanding, placed as Israel was under the tutelage of the law, all that is spiritual, heavenly, and eternal, was veiled in earthly shadows....

'...The shadow, while not itself the body, does point to the body, but vanishes when the body itself appears. The New Testament is the truth, the essence, the core, and the actual content of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is revealed in the New, while the New Testament is concealed in the Old... The benefits of salvation promised and foreshadowed under the Old Testament have become manifest in Christ as eternal and authentic reality. All the promises of God are "yes" and "amen" in Him (2 Cor. 1:20). The Old Testament was not abolished but fulfilled in the new dispensation, is still consistently being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled, until the parousia of Christ' (Herman Bavinck; *The Last Things*, pp. 96-7).

In the eternal purposes of God the church is not a separate institution alongside Israel; much less does she take second place to Israel. She *is* Israel!

### *3. The Olive Tree*

In the previous chapter we looked at three old testament prophecies that speak of coming blessing for Israel, and at the three new testament passages that give us their divinely inspired interpretation. We noticed how in each case the fulfilment of the prophecy is to be seen not in the restoration of an earthly nation, Israel, but in the gathering of the church from every tribe and tongue. Thus the Scriptures teach us the very real unity that exists between God's people of both testaments.

This time we shall explore some more passages from the new testament and show how they too emphasize the unity of God's covenant and people throughout all time. In particular we want to look at a familiar passage in Romans chapter 11.

#### **A Jewish olive tree**

In Romans 11 Paul takes an illustration from the natural creation and uses it to demonstrate the development and growth of the church of God throughout history: "For if the first-fruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?" (vs. 16-24).

In actual fact Paul makes use of not one but two metaphors in this passage, the first-fruit and the olive tree. However, it is the latter which he develops and which we want to take a closer look at in this chapter.

To the Jews, knowing their old testament Scriptures, the figure of an olive tree would have been familiar. It was, after all, one of the names that God had given to His old covenant people: "The LORD called thy name, A green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit" (Jer.11: 16). Similarly His visitations in judgment were likened to "the shaking of an olive tree" (Isa. 17:6; 24:13).

So, in the first place, we see the olive tree symbolizing the family of God in the old dispensation, the church of those days. We see that tree growing, shooting out its many branches as generations of the descendants of Abraham are born. These are what Paul terms the tree's "natural branches" (vs. 21). Those natural branches, therefore, make the tree an exclusively *Jewish* organism, since for many centuries the church was limited almost entirely to the physical offspring of Abraham.

## **Severed branches**

But, in the second place, we notice that within these natural, Jewish branches the apostle makes a distinction. Some of them have been broken off (v. 17), while others remain on the tree.

Who are represented by the severed branches? The passage tells us that they are characterized by unbelief: "because of unbelief they were broken off" (v. 20).

But we should understand that individual believers can never fall away into unbelief and be cut off, separated for ever from the Christ who redeemed them. The Scriptures teach very clearly the doctrines of the preservation and perseverance of the saints in such passages as Psalm 119:33, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end"; John 6:39, "And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day"; and I John 5:18, "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not" (see also Isa. 45:17; Jer 32:40; Phil. 1:6; I Pet. 1:5 and many other passages). The branches that were cut off from the olive tree to lie dead upon the ground cannot, therefore, represent individuals.

No, the branches of the olive tree must represent *lines of generations*. That God gathers His people chiefly through the lines of the generations of His people is a principle sadly neglected today, if not denied altogether, but it is firmly grounded in scripture. We will look at this subject in more detail later on but consider now, for example, Psalm 102:28, "The

children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee"; Psalm 103:17,18, "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children"; Luke 1:50, 55, "And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.... As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever"; and Acts 2:39, "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (see also Deut. 7:9; Ps. 33:11; 135:13; Isa. 51:8; 59:20,21; 65:23; Acts 16:31 and many more).

This principle is in fact an integral part of the covenant promise itself, as God had said to Abraham, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7). This is something that was recognised by both Mary, in her hymn of praise, and Peter on the day of Pentecost.

But family lines can and most certainly do fall away into unbelief. They can be and most certainly are broken off from fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and His church. This we know from our own families, whole branches of which may live and die in unbelief. We also know it authoritatively from scripture itself: "For the LORD loveth judgment, and forsaketh not his saints; they are preserved forever: but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off" (Ps. 37:28 cf. vs. 9,22). This same truth is taught us in John 15 where the Lord employs the picture of a vine, some of whose branches are unfruitful and must be cut off by the husbandman.

Throughout the history of Israel there were many individuals who through unbelief were separated from the nation of Israel and fellowship of God's people. One might think of Ishmael and Esau, of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, of Achan, of Jeroboam and Ahab. Not only were these individual men cut off but their children as well, in many cases to become fearsome enemies of God's people. Concerning such men God says, "Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out" (Ps. 109:13). God visits the iniquity of the fathers "upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Ex. 34:7; Num. 14:18). This is a principle enshrined in His moral law (Ex. 20:5 and Deut. 5:9). Reflecting again on our own families, we know all too sadly that when a relative brought up from his or her mother's knee in the very environment of the gospel rejects that gospel, living and dying in unbelief, it is not only that individual but their children and succeeding generations who depart from the faith of their fathers. They are branches whom God cuts off through unbelief.

So to return to Romans 11, the severed branches of the olive tree represent those

generations of ethnic Jews who, though outwardly members of God's people and of the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, stumbled at the Stone which God lay in Zion. They are the unspiritual, unfruitful, Christ-rejecting branches. In unbelief they refused to receive Messiah and His gospel, they would not enter His kingdom, so God broke them off.

The branches that remained on the tree, however, were those generations of Jews who did not stumble at the Stone laid in their midst, but having seen His marvellous works and heard His profound doctrine, they believed.

## **Grafted branches**

Now these faithful branches were very few in number at the time of Paul's writing, representing a mere remnant, the remnant according to the election of grace (v. 5). With so few limbs we might picture the olive tree as being a sorry sight indeed. So what does the heavenly Tree Surgeon do? Does He abandon this old olive tree? Does He root it up and discard it in favour of a wholly new and flourishing tree? No, it is still "a *good* olive tree" (v. 24). He keeps it and in the place of the branches He has broken off He grafts in branches from a wild olive tree (v. 17).

That old olive tree whose natural branches are Jewish now receives branches from another tree, a wild tree whose natural branches are not Jewish, but Gentile. Gentile generations are ingrafted into the church of Christ to become one spiritual body with Jews, in Christ, and to partake with them of the nourishing sap that flows from the root.

Here, then, is the point towards which we have been working: the olive tree that existed and grew during the old dispensation, which was Jewish, and the olive tree into which Gentiles have been grafted and on which the branches of their generations flourish today, is the *same* olive tree. It has lost branches, yes, and it has received branches from another tree, a wild tree even, but it retains its integrity and identity. It continues to develop in the same organic manner as before, still sending out its branches along the lines of the generations of the Lord's people, but now those branches are generations of Gentiles as well as Jews. And these Gentile generations are warned lest they too should fall into unbelief and be cut off: "For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee" (v. 21).

## **One Church**

We must understand, therefore, that the olive tree does not represent the nation of Israel.

Such an idea would only lead us into confusion and error. When Gentile branches are grafted into the olive tree they are not made proselyte Jews, as though becoming members of an earthly race and nation, no, they are made members of the *church*. This is evident in Romans 11 from the very fact that it is faith, and only faith, not blood, that causes a branch to remain in the tree, "Because of unbelief they were broken off, *and thou standest by faith*" (v. 20).

This in itself teaches us that essentially the church has not changed from the old dispensation to the new. Whether under the old covenant or the new, the root is the same (i.e., Christ), the tree grows in the same manner, and some branches still need to be removed as they prove unfaithful. The only change that occurs is the grafting in of Gentile branches. In all other respects the tree remains the same, and this is because the covenant itself remains essentially the same.

That Gentile branches may yet be cut off by the Lord through unbelief (vs. 21,22) teaches us something else about the olive tree, namely, that it does not represent the church in her purity, as the company of the elect alone, but the church as she is seen in this present sinful world. In the visible church the ratio of the true body of believers to the wider professing church is always a large one, as in Israel of old. The idea of the faithful church being a remnant recurs throughout Scripture, and a believer today does not need a high level of astuteness to observe that while the professing church is large, the believing remnant is a small and sidelined minority, a little flock. But this is the way it is meant to be. It is the way God has ordained it to be.

It is striking too that the professing church, the false church even, grows *out from* the true. The branches grafted into the olive tree bring forth good fruit, but within a generation or two, as those branches grow and send forth yet more branches, unfruitful boughs appear on the tree. We can see from church history how this is outworked. Faithful churches and denominations become unfruitful, unfaithful to the Lord, and even apostate. But once again we must say that this is the way the Lord would have it to be, teaching us that the glory is all His.

Among the many truths that Romans 11 teaches us this one shines out so very clearly, that God does not have, nor ever has had, nor ever will have, two olive trees, only one! And if further proof were needed it is surely to be found in verses 23 and 24 where the Jews who "abide not still in unbelief" are said to be grafted back "into their *own* olive tree". Thus they become one body, incorporated into one organism, with the Gentiles. Contrary to what some would tell us about the Jew once again being given special status in the sight of God and restored to nationhood under the Messiah in the end times, never again will the Jews be a

distinct people of God, separate from the church. Whatever blessing God has in store for a Jew will be found only in the church of Jesus Christ, in the one olive tree and family of God, with the Gentiles.

Paul's metaphor symbolizes most powerfully the principle that the church of Jesus Christ is one, spanning both covenants, old and new.

## **Spiritual things**

It is striking how Paul emphasizes that "the root and fatness of the olive tree", those benefits and blessings of the covenant which were previously the sole preserve of Jews, are now partaken "*with them*" by Gentiles also (v. 17). There is an important lesson for us here, teaching us that the covenantal blessings promised to the Jews were never the earthly, temporal elements of land and physical prosperity, but always the heavenly, spiritual delights of eternal salvation that spring from Christ. He is the holy root from which the branches derive their holiness (v. 16). He is the source of all blessings, and those blessings are now for Gentile as well as for Jew, richly to enjoy.

This same thought is found a few chapters later in Romans where Paul writes, "For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their [the Jews'] spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things" (Rom. 15:27). The blessings which until so very recently had belonged solely to Jews, by virtue of the covenant that God had made with Abraham, were "spiritual things", not temporal; and by grafting Gentiles into the olive tree God has made Gentiles, made *us*, partakers or sharers of those same spiritual things. Israel's God is now our God. He has made us to be His people, bringing us into fellowship with Himself, giving us all the blessings of His salvation so that *we* can join in praise with the old covenant saints and sing, "Blessed be the LORD, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation." (Ps. 68:19). "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps. 103:2-5).

Surely here is one of the great benefits to our souls of singing the Psalms: we give tangible expression to the unity of God's people throughout all ages, old covenant and new. We all sing from the same 'hymn sheet' - God's own hymn-book.

The Book of Psalms occupies a central position in the Scriptures and constitutes the only

book of praises that has ever been given by God to His church. It anticipates the new covenant dispensation, pointing forward to the time when people of every nation and tongue would together praise the one true and living God. Believing Israel looked forward to that day, and today, in the singing of her psalms, we join her in worship, praising together the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus the continuity and unity of the people of God between old and new covenants is demonstrated in their worship.

## **Fellow-citizens**

This idea that Gentiles have been united to God's old covenant Jewish people and enter into their covenant blessings and promises is a recurring theme throughout the new testament. We will take a look at three further examples.

In Ephesians 2:11,12 Paul describes the Ephesian believers as having once been "Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world".

We want to notice especially two things. In the first place the Ephesians had been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel", and in the second place, they were "strangers from the covenants of promise".

By the first expression is meant that they had been excluded from the Jewish theocracy which was Israel. They were strangers to it, like citizens of a foreign land, and hence denied all the privileges that citizenship incurred, i.e., the laws and religious ordinances of God.

By the second expression is meant that God's covenant of grace, established and reaffirmed so many times to His old covenant people such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had been withheld from them. In short, they were "far off" (v. 13).

The relationship between Jew and Gentile was characterized by open and mutual hostility. Jew would not mix with Gentile for fear of defilement (John 18:28), while Gentile viewed Jew with disdain and contempt (John 18:35). Significantly, when Paul and Silas were hauled before the magistrates at Philippi, the accusation made was that "These men, *being Jews*, do exceedingly trouble our city..." (Acts 16:20).

Later in Ephesians 2, however, Paul describes his Gentile readers rather differently: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of

the household of God" (v. 19). What has happened?

The antipathy between Jew and Gentile has been removed by the Lord Jesus Christ. He is "our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (v. 14). He has made "in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby" (vs. 15,16).

This has been achieved because by Christ's blood "ye who sometimes were far off are *made nigh*" (v. 13). "At the cross Jew and Gentile, both reconciled to God, had embraced each other" (William Hendriksen). Those who had been aliens and foreigners, are now fellow-citizens with the patriarchs, Moses, David, and the other old covenant saints, of the Israel of God. We are all citizens together of the same state and nation; all members together of the same family, the household of God, the church. We are present not merely as invited guests, but as those who belong to the family. God has brought us in that we might enjoy all the privileges, rights, and blessings of family members.

Gentiles are no longer aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, but included as members of that commonwealth. No longer are they strangers from the covenants of promise, but heirs of those same covenants, "fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph. 3:6; see also Gal. 3:29; 4:28). Peter exclaimed on the day of Pentecost that from now, "the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are *afar off*, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39).

"God has levelled up the outcast and despised Gentiles and has admitted us to all the privileges of his ancient covenant, making us heirs of Abraham.... He has given us all the blessings which belong to Abraham's seed, because we too possess like precious faith as the father of the faithful himself had." (Spurgeon)

This is precisely what the old testament Scriptures themselves had foretold. From the beginning it was never God's purpose to restrict His covenant with Abraham, with its promises and blessings, to just one family or nation. He had said to Abraham "in thee shall *all families of the earth* be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 26:4). In Galatians 3:8 Paul gives us the inspired interpretation of those very words: "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."

The door is opened wide for Gentiles to be welcomed into the family and household of God. The days prophesied by the prophets are here, days when "many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of

Jacob..." (Micah 4:2; Isa. 2:3). "All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O LORD; and shall glorify thy name" (Ps. 86:9).

This idea can be traced back further, to Genesis 9:27, where we read Noah's prophecy that "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem". Johannes Vos writes, "In the Hebrew idiom, to dwell in the tents of someone means to be the inheritor of that person's wealth and estate". We are Japhethites, but we dwell in the tents of Shem. We are Gentiles, but in Christ, by faith, we are made inheritors of riches that are unsearchable and without price, a spiritual estate of inestimable worth and eternal duration, promised to Abraham and his seed.

But let us go back to the very beginning, to the first evangelical promise made in Paradise: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The seed of the woman is not two seeds, but one. She does not have a Jewish seed and a Gentile seed, but one seed. God does not have a Jewish people and a Gentile people, a Jewish church and a Gentile church, but one people, one church, worshipping the one God through the one Mediator, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **The child and the man**

The second new testament passage we want to look at develops further the theme of inheritance. It is found spanning the close of the third and opening of the fourth chapters of Galatians:

"But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For 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. Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ." (3:23-4:7).

This is a lengthy passage containing much instruction, and we will look at it again in the next chapter, but there is just one point we wish to make at this stage.

The apostle uses the illustration of a little child. The child is a son who is heir to a wonderful inheritance but it is an inheritance which he cannot possess as yet because he is still only a child, a minor. Although legally he is "lord of all" he may as well be a servant, for as far as actual possession is concerned there is no difference between them.

The child is in need of instruction to prepare him for the day when he will receive his inheritance. That instruction is given to him by a schoolmaster, the law, under whose authority he must live until such time as he reaches the age of majority and can receive the inheritance that is rightly his.

That child pictured here is the church of the old dispensation. That church is represented as being heir of all things and lord of all, yet, as a minor, is still under the tutelage of the law and no different from a servant. When the fulness of the time is come, however, and God sends forth His Son, then the church 'comes of age' and God brings it into the full privilege of sonship and the possession of its rightful inheritance.

In this passage, then, Paul shows us a child and an adult. Not two different people, but the same person. As a child grows into adulthood, so the church, the one people of God, has grown up from the old dispensation regime of tutors and governors, into the new dispensation of full sonship and the blessings of eternal inheritance.

The church of Christ is one body.

## **Called to the Light**

For our third and final passage we turn to the apostle Peter and his first letter. He writes to 'the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia' in the following terms: 'But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy' (1 Peter

2:9,10).

We have already noted that the nation spoken of by the apostle is the very same nation as that referred to in Exodus 19:6, but there are yet other elements in these verses that call for our attention, particularly their reference to the *light*. The nation of Israel is sometimes spoken of in the old testament as a light, specifically as ‘a light of the Gentiles’ (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). The opening verses of Isaiah 60 come readily to mind: ‘Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.’ Israel was a nation characterised by light. She had the pillar of fire to guide her by night through the wilderness, she had the seven-branched lampstand lit by oil, and above all she had the ‘Shekinah’ glory, the visible manifestation of God, emphasizing that the light was not Israel herself but rather Jehovah, her covenant God, who was in the midst of her. ‘Zion diffuses light as the moon reflects the light of the sun. It is not Zion’s light in her own right, for her own light was darkness; but it is the light that her Lord gives her’ (E J Young). In contrast, the Gentile nations surrounding Israel and throughout the rest of the world were in darkness, deep spiritual darkness. They had no light, but they would in time be drawn to the light that shone forth out of Zion. ‘The Gentiles shall come to thy light... the forces of the Gentiles shall come to thee’ (Isa. 60:3, 5).

The fulfilment of these prophecies is seen throughout the new testament age in the calling of Gentiles ‘out of darkness into his marvellous light’. The light is now no longer confined to one people but shines among all peoples of the earth. That light specifically is Christ, the light not only of Israel but of the whole world (John 8:12), the Light who arose out of Israel and shone forth from Israel is the One to whom all nations come (cf. Isa. 2:2,3).

In time past these peoples were ‘not a people’, but now in Christ they are ‘the people of God’. Once there was no mercy for them but now they have obtained mercy.

## **The Fulness of the Jews**

Let us return once more to Romans 11 with its picture of the olive tree and consider a question that is frequently asked and causes much discussion: Is it still possible that the Jews as a people, that Israel as an entire nation, might one day be grafted back into the olive tree? Is there not a suggestion of this in verse 24, confirmed in verse 25 with its promise that the

blindness currently darkening the eyes of the nation will be lifted when "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in"? This is certainly a commonly held view, irrespective of ideas concerning the millennium. It is said that toward the end of the age, shortly before the Lord returns, there is going to be a great revival amongst the Jews such that they will return *en masse* to the Messiah whom they once rejected.

As appealing as this idea might be it is not what the apostle appears to be teaching. It must be remembered that it was never the Jews as a people in their entirety, or Israel as a nation, that was cut off from the olive tree. As we noted above, the olive tree was not uprooted and destroyed, but the *unbelieving branches* were broken off. It is the point of Paul's argument throughout this chapter that "God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew" (v. 2). Some remained on the olive tree being "a remnant according to the election of grace" (v. 5), just like the seven thousand in Elijah's day who did not bow the knee to Baal.

It is with this in mind that we must understand verses 12 and 15 for these too, if taken out of context, may leave the reader with the impression that some future generation of Jews will be saved in its entirety. Paul says in verse 12, "Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?". In verse 15 he writes, "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

In these two verses we have reference to the "fall" and "diminishing" of the Jews, their "casting away". This relates to their descent into unbelief, their rejection of the gospel and severing from the olive tree. It has, says Paul, occasioned the enriching of the Gentile world with the riches of salvation, even "the reconciling of the world" to God. But his argument continues: if such has been the blessing occasioned by the fall and casting away of the Jews, how much greater will be the blessing, how much more glorious will the work of God be, that accompanies their "fulness", their "receiving"?

So what is meant by the "fulness" and "receiving" of the Jews? Does it mean that in the end times the Jews as a special people and nation will be restored to favour with God and be saved? Does "fulness" refer to all the Jews, or at least all those living at a certain time? The word "fulness" appears again later in the chapter where Paul speaks of "the fulness of the Gentiles" (v. 25), but quite obviously he is not saying there that all the Gentiles must be saved in order for their "fulness" to be come in. Quite clearly, however, he is speaking of a number, a number that must be completed, made up, or *filled*. What could that number be?

When speaking of the fulness of the Gentiles in verse 25 Paul is meaning that which fills

or completes the number, the very last Gentile to be saved and gathered into the church. When he speaks in verse 12 of the fulness of the Jews he is speaking there too of that which fills or completes the number, namely, the very last Jew to be saved and gathered into the church. It is that which completes the total number of the "people which he foreknew" (v. 2), the sum of all the remnants "according to the election of grace" (v. 5). That filling will be accomplished, and when it happens it will mean blessing for the church even more glorious than its reconciliation to God: it will be life from the dead.

So that leaves us with one final question to answer: what is that life from the dead? It must be said in the first place that the apostle does not say it will be *like* life from the dead. Those commentators who take the view that the passage predicts the conversion of the whole nation of Israel at the end of time, believe that this Jewish revival will have such a spiritually awakening effect on the entire Gentile world that the only appropriate metaphor is "life from the dead". But that is not what Paul says. He does not say it will be *like* life from the dead but that it will *be* life from the dead. Just as the fall of the Jew meant reconciliation, so his fulness and receiving will mean life from the dead. There is no more reason to treat the expression 'life from the dead' metaphorically than there is the word 'reconciliation' but rather to give it the full literal force of *resurrection*. In other words, the fulness of the Jews will herald the glorious resurrection-life of glory with Christ. What we have now is precious, namely, reconciliation with God, and no one can take that away from us, but what we will have then will be more blessed by far. And so vital is the place of the Jew in the church of Jesus Christ, so intimate is the church's unity, as consisting of both Jew and Gentile, that the resurrection of the dead cannot occur until the very last elect Jew is saved, converted, and gathered into the kingdom. Only then will we know the blessedness of resurrection-glory.

## **Where is boasting?**

In Romans 11 Paul is at pains to impress upon his readers that they have no grounds for boasting. Yes, natural branches had been broken off the olive tree so that they, Gentiles, might be grafted in among the remaining Jewish branches, but this is no reason for Gentiles to boast against those rejected branches. They are the *wild* tree; they are the outsiders who have been grafted in to the cultivated tree to partake of its "root and fatness". Paul reminds his Gentile readers, as a remedy for their boasting, that it is not they who support the root, but the root that supports them. All the spiritual blessings that they enjoy stem from the root of that cultivated tree. As one old commentator has put it, "The Jews received no advantage

from the Gentiles; but, on the contrary, the Gentiles have received much from the Jews.... The Gentile believers become the children of Abraham, and all the blessings they enjoy are in virtue of that relation. Hence the covenant (Jer. 31:31) includes all believers; yet it is said only to be made with the house of Israel and Judah." (Robert Haldane)

It is true that Jewish branches were rejected and felled by God in order to make room for Gentile ones, but why were the Jewish branches broken off? Unbelief! And on what basis are the Gentile branches grafted in? Their superiority in the sight of God? Their merits? No, faith alone! And faith is the gift of God sovereignly bestowed on whom He wills, leaving no room for arrogance, pride, or boasting. "Be not high-minded", says Paul, "but fear" (v. 20). Faith and fear are not contradictory graces. In faith we learn to fear ourselves and to distrust all confidence in our own strength and feelings, while placing absolute trust in the Lord.

For this reason there ought to be no room for anti-Semitism in the heart of the Gentile believer. It is only the grace of God that makes him to differ from those rejected natural branches. True, the natural branches rejected the Lord of glory, Messiah, but how careful Scripture is to record that they did so "with the Gentiles" (Acts 4:27).

Gentile believers owe their Jewish brethren an immense spiritual debt, one which was felt and openly acknowledged by the early church. Setting an example to us all of doctrine being outworked in practical godliness, it was this sense of indebtedness that moved the Greek Christians to send help to the suffering Jewish believers of Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-27). "If the Gentiles have come to share in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings" (Hendriksen).

But the greatest debt we owe is to the God of the covenant who by His grace has grafted us into His olive tree that we might yet partake of blessings which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, even life from the dead. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Rom. 11:33).

## *4. The Israel of God*

Who are the Israel of God? I mean the *real* Israel of God?

Are they, as many believe, the Jewish people, that race and nation that descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob? Or are they as others affirm, the church?

In this chapter we shall endeavour to answer this question from four perspectives: the

seed of Abraham, the circumcision, the Jew, and finally Israel herself.

## **The real seed of Abraham**

As Abraham ascended Mount Moriah toward the place of sacrifice, with Isaac at his side, no doubt the words of the Lord, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest" (Gen. 22:2), would have played greatly upon his mind. Striking words they are. Striking not only because of the offering which Abraham was being called upon to make, but also because of the manner in which Isaac is described. Did not Abraham have other sons? Was there not Ishmael? Were there not the sons of Keturah? Then why "thine *only* son"? Or was it simply that Isaac was Abraham's favourite son?

To find the answer we must first go back to Genesis 17 and read again the promise that God made to Abraham: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (v. 7).

The question is, who are the seed? Are they *all* of Abraham's physical descendants? Perhaps one might have thought so, were it not for what Paul tells us in Romans 9. He says there, "Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (vs. 7,8).

Notice that the apostle makes a distinction within Abraham's offspring. He makes a distinction between children of the flesh on the one hand, and children of the promise on the other.

Both Ishmael and Isaac were physical children of Abraham, but only Isaac was "counted for the seed". This is because he alone was a child and inheritor of the promise. It can be said, therefore, that Isaac was Abraham's *real* son, even his "only son".

This is borne out elsewhere in Scripture. For example, "Abraham had two sons, the one by a bond-woman, the other by a free-woman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise" (Gal. 4:22,23). Abraham mistakenly thought he could produce the seed of the promise by his own efforts, but all he succeeded in producing was a son "after the flesh", Ishmael. He had yet to learn the lesson that God alone can give birth to children of the promise, for "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6; cf. 1:11,12). Later on Abraham had many

other children as the husband of Keturah, yet none of these were children of the promise.

We must understand that the seed of Abraham, his real seed, are not the race of people who have sprung from his loins as physical descendants, the Jews, but a *spiritual* people. And as we see from the history of Ishmael and Isaac, that has been the case from the very beginning. It becomes apparent again in the next generation, for of the two sons of Isaac only Jacob is a child of the promise. The true children of Abraham have never been all of his natural descendants, even through the line of Isaac and Jacob, but only "they which are of faith" (Gal. 3:7).

We tend to think of Abraham as being the father of all the Jews, and certainly he is in a physical sense, but Scripture is not interested in the physical. Scripture is concerned with the promise. It is concerned with the *children* of the promise. Abraham is the father of "*all them that believe*" (Rom. 4: 11).

In Galatians 3 the true spiritual character of Abraham's seed shines out so very clearly. The apostle writes: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). The seed of Abraham, then, is no less than Christ and all those who by faith are united in Him: "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (v. 29).

Being a true child of Abraham has never been a matter of blood or physical descent, but always a matter of faith. This is something which the Pharisees of Jesus' time so completely failed to understand. Their constant boast was, "We have Abraham to our father" (Luke 3:8), or "We be Abraham's seed" (John. 8:33). On one occasion, when they took this line, Jesus retorted, "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham" (John 8:39). The point was that by their way of life they were giving ample proof that whatever may be their claims to natural descent, they were not "the seed of Abraham". On the contrary, "ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do" (v. 44).

Abraham is "the father of all them that believe". This has held true from the moment the promise was first made to him. It means that the whole body of believers, the church of both old and new dispensations, whether Jew or Gentile, is united together as Abraham's seed. We are "*one* seed", the children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise.

## **The real circumcision**

As a physical sign of the covenant which He had made with Abraham and his seed, God commanded Abraham: "Every man child among you shall be circumcised" (Gen 17:10ff.). Jews thus became known as the Circumcision, and Gentiles the Uncircumcision (Rom. 3:30; 4: 9; Gal. 2:7).

But what was the significance of this rite? The Jews soon began to attach so much weight to it that they lost sight totally of any spiritual meaning. Paul calls them the "Circumcision-in-the-flesh-made-by-hands", to whom the term "Uncircumcision" was one of disparagement and derision with which to put down the Gentiles (Eph. 2:11). But what did circumcision really signify?

Those patronizing Jews failed to appreciate that the circumcision of the flesh, of which they were so proud, and on which they placed such great store, was instituted as the sign of an inner spiritual reality, and circumcision of the flesh availed nothing if there was not circumcision of the *heart*. In fact, according to Scripture, the circumcision which is "outward in the flesh" is not the real circumcision at all, for "circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Rom. 2:28,29).

This is why, in Deuteronomy 10:16, God commands a nation of rebellious and disobedient Jews to "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked". Likewise, against a much later generation of Jewish leaders, Stephen declaims, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51).

There was no more qualified a Jew than Saul of Tarsus, "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews...." (Phil. 3:5ff.). Yet as a believer, and an apostle of the Lord whom he once persecuted, he says the Circumcision, the *real* Circumcision, are not those who have undergone the outward rite but "*we* are the circumcision, which worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and *have no confidence in the flesh*" (Phil. 3:3).

Again, in his Colossian letter, he writes, "ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2: 11). The circumcision that counts is not the rite performed on flesh by man, but is the justifying and sanctifying work of God in the heart.

This was true from the day the rite was instituted. It was not Abraham's circumcision that was accounted to him for righteousness, but faith. The Scriptures tell us that he received the sign of circumcision as "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not

circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect: Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression. Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all" (Rom. 4:11-16).

This lengthy passage teaches us a number of important truths that we must hold in mind. First, as we have noted already, Abraham is the father of all believers. He came to occupy this position because he himself believed, and righteousness was imputed to him, while he was still uncircumcised. So whether we are circumcised or not; whether we are physical Jews or not, if we are believers then Abraham is the father of us all.

Second, Abraham is also called here "the father of circumcision". Is this simply another way of saying he is the natural father of all physical Jews? Not at all. Abraham is father, not to everyone who bears the outward sign, but only to those who walk in the steps of his faith, whether Jew or Gentile. They alone are the true "Circumcision". A true Israelite is one like Nathaniel of old, 'an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!' (John 1:47).

Third, to this seed of Abraham, to this true spiritual seed gathered from all nations, tribes and tongues, is the promise given that they shall be heirs of the world. In contrast, those who are merely of the law, circumcised in their flesh but knowing nothing of the righteousness which is by faith, have no inheritance at all.

## **The real Jew**

Closely related to the question of the real circumcision is that of the real Jew. This becomes clear from Romans 2, where Paul writes, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (28-29).

Here once again a distinction within the offspring of Abraham is drawn between Jew and Jew. A real Jew is not one who bears the outward and physical marks, but one who has

undergone the inward and spiritual change of being circumcised in his heart by the Holy Spirit. Such a Jew receives praise from God.

The very word *Jew*, being derived from 'Judah', means *praised*. At the birth of this fourth son of Jacob and Leah, his mother said, "Now will I praise the LORD: *therefore* she called his name Judah". At Jacob's death bed, as the aged father blessed each of his sons in turn, the theme of praise occurred again in his address to Judah: "Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise" (Gen. 49:8).

Because many Jews praised *themselves*, and sought praise from other men rather than from God, they did not deserve the name of Jew. In almsgiving, in praying, and in fasting, they loved to be seen by men and to make an open show of their piety, so-called, rather than keep it behind the closed door to be seen only by "thy Father which seeth in secret" (Matt. 6:1-8; 16- 18; 23:5-11). Although they were *called* Jews (Rom. 2:17), they were not really Jews at all for a real Jew is one whose praise comes not from men, but from God.

But this invites the question, how can a person ever be found praiseworthy in the sight of God? In the next chapter of his Roman letter Paul makes abundantly clear the impossibility of the situation: "both Jews and Gentiles... are all under sin". He goes on, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.... There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:9-18).

This being the case we ask the question again, how is it possible for anyone, whether Jew or Gentile, of the old dispensation (note that the passage from Romans 3 is a quote from Psalm 14) or new, to find favour and praise before a holy, righteous God? Certainly it cannot be by the works of the law, although, of course, this was the Jews' hope, "Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law...." (Rom. 2: 17ff.). But a forlorn, indeed impossible, hope that was because despite all their boasting the Jews were still breakers of the law and dishonourers of God's name (Rom 2: 23,24). And the fact that they professed to be the people of God only aggravated their guilt for, as one commentator has put it, "God is dishonoured by the transgressions of his people, in a manner in which he is not dishonoured by the same transgressions in the wicked, who make no profession of being His." (Robert Haldane)

Even the Jew's confidence in his circumcision was misplaced, for circumcision only profits if it is accompanied by the perfect keeping of the whole law: "but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision" (Rom. 2:25-27).

So all the ground is swept away from under the feet of the proud Jew. His confidence in the law, far from being praiseworthy in God's eyes, has been shown to make him even worse than the Gentiles!

Jews and Gentiles together, we need a righteousness which will justify us in the sight of God; a righteousness, moreover, which will not depend on our own perfect obedience of the law of God.

Such a righteousness has been revealed! "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested... Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God..." (Rom. 3:22-26).

Who has sinned? The Gentile only? No, *all* have sinned, Gentile and Jew; there is no difference.

To whom is this righteousness of God given? To all them that *believe*. Of whom is God the justifier? He is the justifier of "him which *believeth in Jesus*" (v. 26).

It is through justification by faith alone, without the works of the law (v. 28), that a man may be found praiseworthy before God. Whether that man be a Jew according to the flesh, or a Gentile, makes no difference. "Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: Seeing it is one God which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith" (Rom. 3:29-30). Here, then, is the heart of the gospel: justification by faith alone.

Now this was not something strangely new for the new covenant. In old covenant times too the gospel was of justification by faith. The saints of those days obtained a good report not by the works of the law, but "through faith" (Heb. 11:39). The promise was not made to Abraham and his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:13).

The righteousness that Paul preached was a righteousness that had been "witnessed by the law and the prophets" (Rom. 3:21), that is, the entire old testament Scriptures. The sacrifices, rites and ceremonies of the Levitical law, and the promises of the prophets, all attested to the truth of justification by faith alone (cf. Gen. 15: 6; Ps. 32:1,2; Hab. 2:4). Of course, it was not seen then in its full glory, being revealed only in earthly type and shadow, but the truth being revealed was always and ever the same: "the just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4).

The real Jew, then, was not the one who was simply born into the family of Abraham and circumcised on the eighth day, for Abraham is "the father of all them that believe" (Rom. 4:11). He is the father of those who walk in the steps of his faith (Rom. 4:12). They "which

are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). Indeed, he is "the father of us all, [As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,]" (Rom. 4:16,17).

The real Jews are the church, believers of both dispensations, whether of the physical stock of Abraham or not, united by faith.

## **The real Israel**

Throughout chapters 9, 10, and 11 of his Roman letter Paul is writing about his brethren, his "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:3). For their sake his heart is filled with great heaviness and continual sorrow so that he can say even, "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ". They are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises.... But now God has rejected the nation. Where then is His faithfulness? Where are His sure word and promises? Have they failed after all?

But having raised the question the apostle quickly supplies the answer: "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. *For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel*" (9:6).

Among the Israelites there is to be found another Israel, the real Israel in whom the word and covenant promises of God are fulfilled (cf. Rom. 11:1-4). Paul comforted himself in knowing that as in the days of Elijah, so in his own day, there was "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:4).

The principle of the remnant is found throughout the Scriptures. Repeatedly during the history of Israel the majority of her people fell into unbelief and were rejected. But whenever apostasy seemed pre-eminent and ready to sweep the nation into oblivion as the judgments of God rained down upon her, God always preserved for Himself a faithful remnant. When Judah was in just such a position, "left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city", Isaiah said, "Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a *very small remnant*, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah" (1:8). At the time of God's judgment upon Israel in Babylon God assures His prophet Ezekiel, "Yet will I leave a remnant..." (6:8; 11:13-16; 14:22). They are "the remnant whom the LORD shall call" (Joel 2:32).

An elect remnant of Jews continues to be saved to the present day, and will continue "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in" (v. 25). "And so", says Paul, meaning *in this*

*manner*, "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11:26).

But in addition to this Jewish remnant, the fullness of the Gentiles also must be gathered in. The Lord said to a group of Jews one day, "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

The elect from among the Jews together with the elect from among the Gentiles thus make up one fold, the one flock of God under their one Shepherd and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Together they are Abraham's children, his *only* children, to whom belong the promises; they are the real Jews whose praise, thanks to the imputed righteousness of Christ, is not of men, but of God; they are the real circumcision, whose sins have been cut off by the circumcision of Christ; they are the real Israel, the holy nation of believers. They are "the Israel of God", walking as new creatures in Christ and glorying in nothing but the cross (Gal. 6:15, 16). They are the church of Jesus Christ, chosen in Him from all nations before the foundation of the world.

## 5. The Covenant and the Law of Moses

We are considering the question of the unity of God's covenant and people. Is there just one covenant that God has made with all His people throughout history, or have there been many different covenants that He has made with various individuals or groups of people at different times? This is the question.

Those of us who believe Scripture teaches there is just one covenant, use the theological term 'covenant of grace' to include all the covenantal dealings that God has had in history with His people. Whether we are speaking of the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Israel, or the new covenant, these are just different forms or administrations of the one everlasting 'covenant of grace'.

Some believers would take issue with us at this point because, for one thing, 'covenant of grace' is not a term found in the bible. They prefer to speak of *many* covenants, each to be clearly distinguished from the others. This, they would say, is the more biblical approach.

In Galatians 3 Paul addresses this question directly, in terms of the relationship between

the covenant God made with Abraham, and the covenant He made with the nation of Israel at Sinai. But we will look at Galatians 3 later because first we must review the history.

## **God remembers His covenant**

The children of Israel are in Egypt under the hard taskmasters of Pharaoh. To them it appears that God has forgotten both them and the covenant He had made with their fathers. But God hears their cries and their groaning. We read, "and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Ex. 2:24). He reveals Himself to Moses from the burning bush as "the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). God is faithful, whose word and promise cannot be broken, and whose covenant stands for ever.

Through Moses God brings His people a message of deliverance, promising them freedom from their captivity and an entrance into the land of Canaan. "And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them. And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, wherein they were strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage: and I have remembered my covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the LORD" (Ex. 6: 2-8).

Notice first that in all of these passages God does not speak of making a different covenant, but of *remembering* the covenant He had made those many years before with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is saying now that He had not ever forgotten or broken that covenant, nor the promises He had made, but would most surely fulfil them, bringing the people into the land of Canaan by delivering them from the cruel bondage of Egypt.

## **God fulfils His promises**

Furthermore, it must be understood that this is the picture language of types and shadows. The deliverance from Egypt and the entry into Canaan were not the real fulfilment of the promises; they were only figures. After all, the land had been promised to Abraham himself, as well as to his seed, but he had never so much as set foot in Canaan (Acts 7:5). No, the real fulfilment is to be found in the deliverance of the sinner from the bondage of sin and his entrance into glory. In other words, as we have noticed so often before, the covenant promises that God had given to the patriarchs were not physical, but spiritual; not earthly, but heavenly, and that they well knew.

This means that God, in delivering *us* from the cruel bondage of sin by the blood of Calvary's paschal Lamb, separating *us* from the world unto Christ and to fellowship with Himself, has by grace fulfilled in *us* the covenant promises that He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thereby uniting us with them. God has opened up for *us* a way from sin and death, a way into heaven itself. By grace we live in the joyous possession of those covenant promises, and in the everlasting experience of God's covenant life and blessing.

Still God remembers His everlasting covenant. Still He sees His elect people in the sore bondage of sin and depravity, and still He brings them out into true liberty and eternal communion with Himself. As we saw in the previous chapter, they are Abraham's true seed and they enter into the covenant blessings promised to their father of old.

## **God renews his covenant**

In Exodus 19 we read of the covenant that God made with the nation of Israel, 430 years after establishing His covenant with Abraham. The children of Israel are now on the other side of the Red Sea and God speaks to them, through Moses: "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (vs. 4-6).

Once again the Lord does not speak of making a different covenant, but simply commands the children of Israel to "keep my covenant". What covenant does He mean? It can only be the covenant He had made long ago with their fathers.

Notice too that He reminds them that their deliverance from the house of bondage was

"unto myself". It was, above all else, a spiritual deliverance into the arms of God. They were a people brought into fellowship with Him to be His own special people, His peculiar treasure. This is the essence of the covenant.

But what is most significant for our purpose is that the renewal of the covenant was made at the giving of the law. Moses here is on Sinai. First, God's moral law is written down on tablets of stone as ten commandments, and then it is applied, as if for little children, line upon line, precept upon precept, to every aspect of the religious and civil life of the children of Israel (Ex. 20 ff.).

What does this mean for the covenant? Does it mark a change in the covenant, or even a different covenant altogether, superseding the one that went before? Does it mean, even, that faith is no longer adequate for salvation but the keeping of the religious and civil rules of typical Israel has also become necessary?

This was the view of certain teachers in Galatia many hundreds of years later. These men went around teaching that Gentile converts were obliged to observe the rites and rituals of the ceremonial law with its "days, and months, and times, and years", and its requirement of circumcision (Gal. 4:10; 6:12). They wanted to continue the old Mosaic administration and were saying, in effect, that the adding of the law of Moses had brought about a change in the covenant, even a permanent change. Paul has to write to the Galatian churches in order to correct this error, and it is especially in the passage beginning at chapter 3 verse 15 that he demolishes it entirely.

Incidentally, when Paul refers throughout the passage to the law he is speaking of the Mosaic economy or administration, with its system of regulations, rites and ceremonies, rather than to the moral law. He says in verse 19 that it was "ordained by angels in the hand of a *mediator*". A look back to the giving of the law in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 will confirm that while the ten commandments were spoken by God to the children of Israel directly, the statutes of the civil and ceremonial law were given to them through the mediation of Moses; hence it is called "the law of Moses" (cf. Acts 15:5; I Cor. 9:9).

## **God confirms His covenant**

Even at a human level, the apostle says, when a man enters into covenant with another man, making promises and commitments, he may not change it at a later date. He is bound by his word (v. 15). How much more so is God! And to whom has God given His word? "Now to

Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." (v. 16)

The Judaizers' argument was that the promises were made to Abraham, who was long dead by the time the law was given. So surely the law, and the covenant then made with Israel, superseded any covenant made with Abraham? Now this may have been a reasonable assumption to make were it not for that fact that the covenant had been made not only with Abraham but also, as Paul now points out, with his *seed*. And who is this seed? It might be natural to assume that Abraham's physical descendants, the Jews, are in view, but not at all. If God had said "seeds" that may have been the case, but God had said "seed". And that seed is Christ.

So here is the supreme reason why the covenant with Abraham has never been, nor can ever be, annulled or altered. Not only is God bound by His word but the covenant was made centrally with Christ, the Head and Mediator of the covenant. The promises were given to Him on the behalf of all those whom He represented, the elect given Him in eternity by the Father. We will say more about this presently. This means too that all who are in Christ, in which ever age or dispensation they have lived, whether Jew or Gentile, are members together of the one covenant of grace. The covenant and its promises have always been the same - God will save His people, be to them their God, and they shall be His people.

This interpretation is borne out by the following verse, where Paul points out that just as a human covenant is "confirmed", in other words, it is ratified or established beyond any further change, so also was God's covenant with Abraham (v. 17).

This directs our attention to Genesis 15. It was the practice in those days for two parties in an agreement to walk together between the pieces of a slain animal or animals. This indicated their solemn commitment to the pact they had made. In fact, rather than break their agreement they would prefer themselves to be cut into pieces like the animal. Thus when God establishes His covenant with Abraham and He too performs this ritual, it is to assure Abraham of the certainty of His promise. Either the promise will be fulfilled, or He too will be cut into pieces, and God will cease to be God! This was God's confirmation of His covenant with His servant. The covenant was sealed.

In passing, it should not escape our notice that unlike the normal convention, God walked between the pieces of the animals *alone* while Abraham lay on the ground in a deep sleep. This teaches us most vividly that the covenant of grace is a unilateral covenant. It is *God's* covenant. *He* establishes it. Unlike a human covenant which is bilateral, an agreement between two parties, the covenant of grace is *all* of God; it is *all* of grace. And it is only

because the covenant is all of God that the promise is sure.

But notice too Paul states in Galatians 3:17 that the covenant was not confirmed in Abraham, but in *Christ*. "So we see that God had not an eye simply unto Abraham, nor to the worthiness that was in him, but that Abraham was a member of the Church, whereof Jesus Christ was always the head" (John Calvin). That the church is a body and Christ is its head is taught clearly and often in the Scriptures (cf. Eph. 1:18, 2:19; 4:15; 5:23). It means that the Lord and His people are a unity, and all that Christ did for them is truly theirs. Thus Abraham was blessed only as he stood in Christ, and it is only as we stand in Christ that we too are blessed along with him. The blessing of Abraham comes to the Gentiles "*through Jesus Christ*" (Gal. 3:14).

God established His covenant with Abraham as He has established it with all of those who are members of the body of Christ. As Calvin points out, God's eye is pre-eminently on Christ, and through Him on the members of His body. This is why it is so foolish to speak of many covenants. The covenant is an everlasting covenant, and must be so, it cannot be broken, it cannot be changed or superseded because it is made with Christ, and the body of Christ is one body.

This is confirmed towards the end of the chapter where Paul states that the seed of Abraham are all those who are united *in Christ* (v. 29). Abraham is the father of all believers (v. 7). Thus, rather than annulled or amended, the covenant continues down the generations to our own day. The covenant God made with Abraham He made with *us* and with *our* children, and its promises are *our* promises. To be sure, it is now divested of the picture language of types and shadows, but in essence the covenant remains the same.

Whether to Abraham or to his seed, always the covenant promises and blessings are the same, and always they are given through faith alone (v. 18). As Paul writes elsewhere, the promise that Abraham should be the heir of the world "was not to Abraham, *or to his seed*, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 4: 13).

The covenant is unaltered. The law of Moses changed nothing. Walter Chantry is quite right when he says that Galatians 3:16, "will demolish the arguments of those who deny that there is a covenant of grace" (*God's Righteous Kingdom*; p. 103).

## **A temporary addition**

In contrast to the covenant of grace, the ceremonial law which the Galatian Judaizers were

trying to impose on believers, Paul says, was given to the church as a temporary measure.

First, it was to be effective only "**till the seed should come**" (v. 19). The law was added "because of transgressions". The children of Israel had a natural tendency to wander away from the Lord into idolatry, thus endangering the promised seed. The law was given not for their justification, but to instil in them an awareness of sin and to awaken in their hearts a sense of guilt, that they might look for their salvation in the Christ promised in the covenant and prefigured in the ceremonies. The law pointed ahead to Christ, the seed, so that with His coming and fulfilling of the civil and ceremonial laws the burden of ritual fell away. It had served its purpose.

Second, the church was kept under the law only **until faith came** (v. 23). This cannot mean faith in the subjective, experiential sense, because old testament believers too were men and women of faith (Heb. 11). But faith can be understood in another sense, objectively. Hence Jude speaks of "*the faith* once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). He is referring to the body of truth fully revealed in Christ, meaning the content of the gospel which we believe, and it is to this that Paul refers in Galatians 3:23. Until the full revelation in Christ was made known, Paul says, "we were kept under the law", but when "the faith" was revealed, the law became redundant.

Third, the church was under the law only **until "the fulness of the time was come"**. Then God would send forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law (Gal. 4:4,5). The bondage of the old Mosaic system, like the discipline of a schoolmaster, was to be only for a time. Then the church would reach its maturity and be delivered to enjoy all the privileges of full sonship through the Spirit of God.

How foolish, then, to attempt to go back to the law! "Who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. 3:1). These things belonged to a past age when the church was like a child, to be treated as a servant. "Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Gal. 3:7).

Thus the extent of the Galatians' folly is fully exposed, earning them the censure and undisguised incredulity of the apostle: "How turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" (Gal. 4:9).

Yet is not this exactly what some believers even today would have us to do? Their response to the social, political, and economic problems of the world is to 'reconstruct' society along the lines of old testament Israel, hence the name they take to themselves, "Christian Reconstructionists". Understanding the civil legislation of Moses' day as God's

pattern for proper government in all lands and all ages, they would seek to transplant it into our own modern world as the solution of all its ills and thus, as they see it, usher in the rule of Christ over the nations.

Others, of the Dispensational school of thought, share similar aspirations and expectations, setting their hopes upon an earthly millennial reign of Christ when the ceremonies of Moses will be reinstated.

Both these errors are Galatian in character, failing to understand the purpose and transience of the Mosaic administration.

But as much as it is right to reject these errors concerning the law, we must not waver in our contention for the unity of the covenant. The law of Moses and the covenant are not the same thing. While the Mosaic law was temporary, the covenant, as we have sought to show, is everlasting. It is permanent. It's very character, as an inseparable bond of friendship between God and His people, in Christ, determines this. The blessings of the covenant come not by the works of the law, but by faith. This has always been the case. Whether to Abraham (and, for that matter, his predecessors such as Noah and Enoch), Moses, or Paul, the Galatian believers and every subsequent new testament saint, the covenant promises are fulfilled in them by faith alone.

We need not be timid about the unity of the covenant for fear, perhaps, of giving the impression we advocate going back to the law of Moses. For hundreds of years before the law was given the old covenant stood alone, and throughout the entire administration of Moses it remained intact, unchanged and unchanging, emerging into the full light of day with the coming of Christ. With those countless ceremonial and judicial laws forever done away the covenant still continues, and shall through all eternity.

Let us not hold back from this truth but maintain it without compromise, and declare it without fear.

## *6. A Spiritual Covenant*

The covenant of grace is one throughout all ages, and all those whom the Lord makes partakers of its blessings and inheritors of its promises are one people; they are one church. So the bible teaches.

But over the last 150 years this truth has been subject to the most destructive influences imaginable through the spread of the theory of Dispensationalism, aided particularly by the immense popularity of the Scofield Reference Bible.

Dispensationalism is so named because of the several "dispensations" into which it divides Biblical history, but its most important distinguishing feature is the idea that the Church is composed of those, and only those, who are saved between Pentecost and the so-called "secret rapture". Thus, it forces a sharp division between the old and new covenants, between Israel and the Church, and between the old and new testaments of Scripture. Israel and the church are portrayed as being two distinct peoples, the one being God's earthly people, and the other His heavenly people. When Scripture speaks of Israel it always means the earthly nation of Israel and never the church, while when speaking of the church it means only the church of the new testament. Israel, in accordance with being an earthly nation, is promised earthly blessings, while the church being a heavenly people is promised spiritual blessings.

In previous chapters we have been at pains to stress the spiritual character of the covenant of grace and its promises. We have pointed out that under the old covenant too the blessings that God promised His people were spiritual. But does this mean that the old covenant had no national and earthly dimension whatsoever? Were there after all temporal blessings attached to it? Do the Scriptures speak of an earthly aspect so that perhaps we can meet Dispensationalism half way? Perhaps there is at least a sense in which the promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants was fulfilled in their occupation of Canaan. Or maybe the sheer number of descendants is fulfilment of the promise of "seed as the dust of the earth" (Gen. 13:16). Let us see what the Word of God says.

## **Heavenly promises**

The covenant, we should remember, is a sacred bond between God and men. God said to Noah, 'I establish my covenant with you...' (Gen. 9:9), and to Abraham He said, 'And I will establish my covenant between me and thee...' (Gen. 17:7). The covenant therefore has to do with the relationship between the Most High God, who is holy in all His thoughts and perfect in all His ways, and man, who by virtue of his fall into sin is totally depraved in heart, mind, and will. Straightaway this makes the covenant spiritual. It is a bond of friendship between God and men where before there was only enmity. It is a bond secured by the

Mediator of the covenant, God's only begotten Son and our Saviour, Jesus Christ, through whose shed blood our sins are forgiven and we are reconciled to God so that He is our God, and we are His people. That is spiritual.

Even those old testament events that are sometimes understood as being earthly fulfilment of the covenant promises, which we have already mentioned, are really no such thing. As we saw in the last chapter with respect to the Exodus, they are but types, shadows, or earthly figures that pointed the Lord's people to their true fulfilment in the gospel. Far from making the people earthly minded, it was the purpose of the types to direct them away from carnal things to spiritual things. The old covenant was earthly only insofar as the gospel was revealed in earthly figures. The message, the content of those earthly figures, however, was always and only spiritual; it was the gospel.

Let us take a look at three more of those earthly pictures and see how this is true.

## **The seed**

Consider first the promise of the seed. God had said to Abraham, 'I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore' (Gen. 22:17; see also 15:5). Does this promise have an earthly fulfilment? Hebrews 11:12 certainly seems to indicate that its fulfilment is already past: 'Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.' The timing of this fulfilment may possibly be linked with the deliverance from Egypt: 'Thy fathers went down into Egypt with threescore and ten persons; and now the LORD thy God hath made thee as the stars of heaven for multitude' (Deut. 10:22). Or it may be identified as the monarchy of Solomon, when 'Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking, and making merry' (I Kings 4:20). Solomon himself gave thanks to God that He had made him king over a people 'like the dust of the earth in multitude' (II Chron. 1:9; cf. Gen. 13:16).

But were these historical events really in fulfilment of the promise, or at least of an earthly aspect of the promise? Was this great people who came out from Egypt, or who lived during Solomon's reign, really the 'great nation' that God had promised to make of Abraham's seed (Gen. 12:2)? The reference to the people eating, drinking and making merry already suggests, I believe, that we should be looking elsewhere. While there is no question that the children of Israel were greatly multiplied and exceedingly prosperous during Solomon's reign, it was still the time of promise, not of fulfilment. While certainly

impressive, the number of the people who came up from Egypt and the prosperity of the nation in Solomon's time are not to be understood as *fulfilment* of the promise, but as earthly, old covenant *types* of its fulfilment.

Concerning that great multitude the Scriptures say bluntly 'These all died' (Heb. 11:13). This too should set our alarm bells ringing. Was not the land promised to be 'for ever' (Gen. 13:15; 28: 13,14)? Was it not to be an 'everlasting possession' (Gen. 17:8)?

But the writer to the Hebrews continues, 'These all died *in faith*, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth'. So even that old covenant people recognized that the promise of a great seed dwelling for ever in a beautiful land flowing with milk and honey, had not yet been fulfilled. They knew that they sojourned amongst imperfect earthly types and shadows while the perfect reality was yet to come, and was *heavenly*. 'They desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city' (Heb. 11:13-16).

## **The kingdom**

God made to David a solemn promise: 'thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever' (II Sam. 7:16). When was this promise fulfilled? Well, once again we are directed to David's lineal successors, to Solomon and the kings of Judah, but were they really God's fulfilment of His promise? There is a problem already in that the promise speaks of the kingdom being established as an *everlasting* kingdom, and the throne an *everlasting* throne. By the time of the coming of Christ the line of David had been reduced to one woman, Mary, and the throne was occupied by Herod, a henchman of the Roman empire. So what had become of the promise?

To that same Mary of Nazareth came the word of the Lord by an angel that she would conceive and bring forth a son, Jesus, 'and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end' (Luke 1:31-33). The promise recorded in II Samuel 7:16 finds its fulfilment, then, in Christ. The sons of David who occupied his throne in Jerusalem were not the true fulfilment but were earthly types of the true King, the King of glory. To Him it is said by God Himself, 'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom' (Heb. 1:8).

His throne and His kingdom are not like the temporal, carnal thrones and kingdoms of

this world for they have their day, while His are for ever. Neither is His kingdom the thousand year reign of the millenialists for at the close of the thousand years their kingdom will end, but of His kingdom 'there shall be no end'.

## **The rest**

Let us look now at another of the old covenant promises of God. Moses had said to the children of Israel, 'But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there...' (Deut. 12:10,11). Central to the promise of the land, then, was the idea of *rest*. Now it was Joshua who was to lead a later generation of the children of Israel across the Jordan river and into Canaan. We read, 'And the LORD gave them rest round about, according to all that he sware unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. There failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass' (Josh. 21:44,45). But was this rest the rest that God had had in view in His promise? According to Hebrews 4 it was not because, as the inspired writer points out, God later repeated His promise of rest through David, but if Joshua had given them rest, 'then would he not afterward have spoken of another day' (Heb. 4:8). And indeed, Solomon, again at the dedication of the temple, referred to the promised rest when he stood up and blessed the congregation: 'Blessed be the LORD, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised: there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant' (I Kings 8:56). So already we have two 'fulfilments'. The true rest cannot therefore be identified with any earthly inheritance, but 'There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God' (Heb. 4:9), and that real rest is the rest of heaven, which is the inheritance of the people of God through Christ alone and is entered into by death.

The writer of the Hebrew letter concludes his register of old testament saints with the comment, 'And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise', meaning they did not receive the *fulfilment* of the promise. That fulfilment must await *our* day in order that we too might share in its perfection, 'God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect' (Heb. 11:39,40). Calvin comments, 'If those on whom the great light of grace had not yet shone showed such patience

in bearing their ills, what effect ought the full light of the gospel to have on us? A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now the sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still hold to the earth?’

So by looking at these and other examples we can see that the promise did not comprise two aspects or components, a heavenly and an earthly, with their respective fulfilments in heavenly and earthly lands. The people did not have their eyes set on two places at once, heaven and earth; their affections were not divided between an earthly land and a heavenly, but on heaven alone for they knew that the promise was solely spiritual in content and heavenly in fulfilment.

For this reason we do not share Pre-millennialist, Dispensationalist and Zionist dreams of a still future fulfilment in a restored national Israel, but we look solely to a spiritual fulfilment that finds its realization in the everlasting kingdom of heaven. Even now this holy nation, this great kingdom, is being realized in the hearts of men by the Spirit of He who is greater than Solomon. Won by conquest over sin and death through the atoning work of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom of peace and righteousness, a kingdom that is not of this world, a kingdom that ‘cometh not with observation’ but is ‘within you’ (John 18:36; Luke 17:20,21).

The innumerable seed of Abraham are a spiritual people. They are that great multitude whom John is shown in heaven, saved out of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues. Crying ‘Salvation to our God’, they stand before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes and with palms of victory in their hands, more than conquerors through Him who loved them and died for them (Rev. 7:9,10).

Neither do we share the hopes and aspirations of Christian Reconstructionists with their aim to subdue all things and all nations under Christ and His law. This is just one more carnal, earthly mis-interpretation of the covenant promises of God.

## **This great nation**

The idea that God should have alongside the gospel a second agenda that is carnal, national and temporal in character, whether fulfilled in past history or yet to be realized, is simply contrary to all that is taught in Scripture. What was the measure of Israel’s greatness? Was it physical? Was it the extent of her borders or the size of her population? Was it her political and moral influence on neighbouring nations? Was it her military prowess? God tells us it

was none of these things. On the contrary, she was ‘the fewest of all people’ (Deut. 7:7) and as she grew closer to her neighbours any flow of influence travelled in quite the wrong direction. No, her greatness lay in another sphere. Wisdom and understanding were her possessions, the True God was her faithful covenant companion and help, and righteousness was her law. These were the qualities that characterized Israel’s greatness. ‘Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments.... Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as this law, which I set before you this day?’ (Deut. 4:5-8).

Earthly might and prestige have never been among the promises of God to His people, even in the age of types and shadows. While Israel trembled in the face of the so-called ‘great nations’ around her, like Edom and Moab, God points out to her that when measured by the only criteria that really count, *spiritual* criteria, it is she alone who is the truly great nation. She has been made great by the grace of her God in redeeming her from sin, and no power on earth, in heaven or in hell can take that greatness away from her. However small she may be numerically, however impotent and despised politically, however weak militarily, she is a great nation, for God is her god and her Saviour.

So it is true of the church throughout all time. Numbers, politics, and military might are not her concern. When the church becomes obsessed with numbers, her attractiveness to the ungodly and her influence in the world, all in the interests of appearing strong and impressive before men, then she has departed far from her calling, becoming foolish and ignorant before men and God.

No, wisdom and understanding are her possessions, the One True God is her covenant Redeemer and Friend, and righteous are her laws. These are her strength, these are her greatness, and these she is to remember, to treasure in her heart, and teach to her children (Deut. 4:9). May we do that. May we remember the way the Lord has led us, the way of His holy statutes and judgments; may we treasure all our days the great works the Lord has done for our salvation; and may we teach them to our children in the confidence that God will continue His covenant, raising up from among them a Godly seed who in turn will teach their children also (cf. Ps. 78:5-7).

## **The hope of Israel**

The hope of old testament Israel was never an earthly land but always the spiritual blessings of salvation through faith in the risen Christ, by grace. The apostle Paul was a preacher *par excellence* of this glorious gospel and suffered much for its sake, yet when bound in Rome he testified that it was ‘for the *hope of Israel* I am bound with this chain’ (Acts 28:20). On a previous occasion, defending himself before King Agrippa, he had answered, ‘And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope’s sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews’ (Acts 26:6,7).

Paul saw an irony in that throughout his ministry he had said nothing more than ‘those things which the prophets and Moses did say should come: That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles’ (Acts 26:22,23), yet for saying those very things the Jews had set out to kill him. While professing to know so much about the old testament Scriptures, they in fact knew nothing. Looking for a political deliverance and an earthly kingdom as Israel’s hope, they wanted nothing to do with a man who preached ‘that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance’ (vs. 20,21).

Paul held out no other hope for Israel than the hope that was present in the gospel, the hope made by God to the fathers in the promise, the same hope that he preached to the Gentiles - ‘the hope of the gospel’ (Col. 1:23).

Dispensationalism would hold out to Israel another hope. With its novel idea of the new testament church being a mere ‘parenthesis’ in sacred history, holding that earthly Israel is primary in God’s purposes and will be restored in a future millennial kingdom, while the church is only a temporary interruption, it holds out the prospect of earthly blessing for the Jews, the literal fulfilment of God’s promises to His earthly people. This, according to the theory, is what Christ would have done in the first place had He not been thwarted by the Jews. But now the Jew must wait until the ‘church age’ is past, for then his time will come. Such hope is an illusion.

## **'A token of the covenant'**

If the covenant and its promises were purely spiritual, having no carnal aspect, where does

this leave circumcision? Did not that have a dual purpose, an earthly as well as a heavenly meaning? Was it not in some sense a national ‘badge’, a physical sign borne in the body to identify a man as a Jew, belonging to God’s separate earthly people and thus entitled to national, earthly blessings? Let us see if that is what the Bible tells us.

Circumcision was instituted by God as a sign of the covenant between Himself and Abraham and his seed, but that covenant, as we have noted, was spiritual. Circumcision was, said God, ‘a token of the covenant betwixt me and you’ (Gen. 17:11). It was a sign of the bond, the relationship that God had established with Abraham whereby Abraham was now His friend. (II Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jam. 2:23). Thus circumcision was a sign of *salvation*.

Furthermore, as if to confirm this, we are told in the new testament that Abraham’s circumcision was ‘a *seal of the righteousness of the faith* he had yet being uncircumcised’ (Rom. 4:11; cf. Gen. 15:6). So in both Genesis 17 at the institution of the rite, and in the new testament commentary on that event, there is no suggestion that either circumcision or the covenant itself had any earthly, temporal, or national element.

Indeed Scripture militates against the whole idea. Circumcision was an outward sign of an internal, spiritual reality, namely the cutting away of sin from the hearts of God’s people. It signified the work of the Holy Spirit in cleansing and purifying the heart. It represented the ‘putting off the body of the sins of the flesh’ and was accomplished ‘by the circumcision of Christ’, i.e., circumcision *by* Christ, (Col. 2:11). This was not merely its deeper meaning, nor its higher meaning, but its *only* meaning. Therefore, without the separation from sin which it signified, circumcision in the flesh was of no consequence and in itself conferred no blessing, benefit, or advantage of any kind, spiritual or otherwise.

Throughout Israel’s history it was true of the majority of her people that while they were circumcised in the flesh they were *un*-circumcised in the place that mattered: the heart. This was evident from their marked unwillingness to separate themselves from the sins and idolatry of their heathen neighbours. They would discover that, rather than confer privilege and blessing, mere flesh circumcision afforded them no protection from the wrath of God: ‘Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings’ (Jer. 4:4).

Early in their history an entire generation of the children of Israel felt the fierce displeasure of God. Did their circumcision, their Jewishness, alleviate their punishment? Not at all, for they perished in the wilderness (I Cor. 10:5; Heb. 3:9-11). Outwardly they were Jews, but ‘he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is

outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter' (Rom. 2:28,29). In fact, by bearing the outward sign while not possessing the inner reality, they were hypocrites in God's sight, only increasing their guilt and making themselves worse than the heathen. They were Jews in name only, and how quick God is to condemn hypocrisy.

The Lord sees not as man sees for the Lord looks on the heart while man looks on the outward appearance. How often did God give his prophets of old the task of crying out against a deceitful and hypocritical generation? 'This people draw near me with their mouth,' He would say, 'and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me' (Isa. 29:13; cf. 1:11-15).

The principle charge which the Lord Jesus brought against the scribes and Pharisees was that they were hypocrites and the children of those who killed the prophets. 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness... Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?' (Matt. 23:27- 33).

Similarly the Lord knew the heart of Nicodemus, that although he was outwardly circumcised, he needed to be born again (John 3:1ff). He needed the circumcision of the heart for it is only this heart circumcision that gives true life, as he, 'a master of Israel', should have known. Did not the old testament Scriptures promise, 'And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest *live*' (Deut. 30: 6)?

Parallels may be drawn with the professing church of our own day. We may be baptised church members, we may profess to be the people of God, but if there is no 'putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ' (Col. 2:11), if there is no cleansing from sin by the washing of His blood and Spirit, then there is no life in us. If we bear the sign and outward profession but not the reality, there is no love of God in our hearts; we are but hypocrites, still dead in our sins and at enmity with God. For all the outward appearances, religious rites alone afford the sinner no protection from the justice and wrath of Almighty God, yet it is to be feared that in just such ceremonies vast numbers of the professing church place their hope and trust.

God's covenantal dealings with men have ever been *spiritual*. They are to do with the relationship He has with man, a relationship that was destroyed at the fall and which only He restores through His all-gracious gift of salvation that is through faith in His Son. What do

we know of that relationship? What is our *experience* of the covenant of grace? What do we know on a daily basis of friendship and fellowship with God? Do we walk with the Lord, or do we try to keep one foot in the world? How active is our prayer life? How often do we read and meditate on God's Word, listening to Him as He speaks to us from its pages so full of truth and wisdom? These are pointedly spiritual questions because this is what the covenant is all about: the relationship of spiritual with spiritual, the friendship of holy with holy. These are the matters with which we should concern ourselves. 'If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, *not on things on the earth*' (Col. 3:1,2).