

THE OATH-BOUND COVENANT

– *GENESIS 15:1,5-16.* – FEBRUARY 24. –

Golden Text: – "He believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness."

IN our last lesson we noted the unwise choice made by Lot, the result of which was his closer association than was necessary with the ungodly of Sodom. Additionally it exposed him to the same difficulties to which his neighbors, who were not under the special providence of God, were exposed. It appears that Sodom and the surrounding cities of the Jordan valley had for some time been paying tribute to Chedorlaomer, whose capital city was several hundred miles further north. When they ceased to pay tribute Chedorlaomer sent an army – composed in part of recruits from various subject kings on the way – to take possession of Sodom as instead of the tribute money. Together with spoil of gold and silver and other valuables numerous captives were taken, of whom to make slaves. Lot, his family, his servants and his property were taken, sharing in all the burdens of the Sodomites. We can well imagine his discouragement and self-condemnation – that he had not only experienced vexation in his new home country by reason of the unrighteousness of his neighbors and the contaminating influence upon his family, but now he was sharing with them in the vicissitudes of his present condition, whereas had he remained with Abraham, his uncle, matters might have been different: evidently God had a special protecting care over Abraham – he was not captured nor despoiled.

Although Abraham was noted as a man of peace, we find him very loyal to principle in connection with this trouble. Two of the captured ones escaped and brought word to Abraham of the capture of the Sodomites, with Lot and his family. The man of God was not long in deciding respecting his proper course.

Summoning all of his servants capable of assisting in such an emergency, 318 in number, he armed them and set out for the deliverance of his nephew. We are not to suppose that the army which captured the Sodomites was a large one, even though the names of four kings are introduced in connection with it. This was not a very long time after the flood, and the entire population was not as yet very large. The suggestions of higher critics about vast armies, great cities, etc., at this time, are out of harmony with the facts – first, the shortness of time after the flood; and, second, the ability of Abraham, with 318 men, to even make an attack and disconcert and confuse the army and deliver Lot and the Sodomites and all their goods. These facts all agree that the cities, the armies, the kingly powers of that day, were very meager in comparison to what we have in mind when we use similar terms in our day. In all probability the armies of the four kings combined did not exceed a thousand men, and the entire population of Sodom probably much less. The building of a city in those times would correspond more nearly to the building of a fort in our day. Thus, for instance, we read that Cain went to the land of Nod and built him a city – a house or villa for himself and his family.

Abraham's heroism in the matter was fully matched by his generosity, for not a particle of the spoil would he take for himself. The characters which the Lord loves and chooses are those which are unselfish, generous as well as just. In these respects Abraham showed that he had a considerable measure of the original image of God still remaining with him, not obliterated by the fallen conditions through which himself and his ancestors as members of the race of Adam had passed. On the other hand we see in Lot a less noble character naturally, a less strong character. This is evidenced afresh in the fact that even after this experience and deliverance he continued to reside in Sodom, to choose the life of luxury and ease, unfavorable to himself and his family, morally and religiously. Abraham chose the better part: his God was his friend, in whom he delighted; and such experiences in life as

would best enable him to comply with the divine arrangements respecting him were the ones that he chose, and to the attainment of which he pressed his energies.

REPETITION OF THE COVENANT

We have already referred to the fact that God agreed to make a covenant with Abraham while he was still living in the land of Chaldea, and that the covenant itself was consummated and made applicable to Abraham from the time that he set his foot upon the land of promise in obedience to the divine call. But for his encouraging and the strengthening of his already great faith, God repeated this promise over and over in different terms. (See Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1,5,18; 17:1-10; 18:19; 21:12; 22:16-18.) There was in fact but one covenant, but various statements of it.

In our present lesson we have one of these repetitions of the covenant with some peculiar features. (V. 1.) In a vision the Lord assured him that he should not fear, that his God would be his shield and his exceeding great reward. Quite probably a fear had come to Abraham, in connection with the deliverance of his nephew Lot, that the kings whom he had ignominiously defeated would return better prepared, better on guard, and wreak their vengeance upon him, and that thus he might be interrupting, interfering, with the **[R3944 : page 57]** promise God had made that he and his posterity should inherit the land of Canaan. The declaration, "I am thy shield," would set at rest any doubts or fears along this line, as we elsewhere read, "When he giveth quietness who then can make trouble?" If the Lord would shield him how then could all the kings of earth do him harm or interrupt the divine program for blessing him and his posterity? The other statement is also worthy of notice: "I am thy exceeding great reward." Already he was the recipient of God's favors, rewards for his faith and obedience, and the promises also were in the line of rewards. But the statement here made went beyond all this and

enumerates a still higher, grander truth, namely, that as Abraham had given himself fully to God, the latter now declares that in a sense he would give himself to Abraham, he would be his reward – to have his friendship, his fellowship, his love, his care, would be the highest and best reward that could possibly be given to Abraham for his fidelity.

And are not these precious promises applicable to the spiritual seed of Abraham? Is not this the essence of the Apostle's declaration to the Church – "All things are yours, for ye are Christ's and Christ is God's"? Again we hear the Apostle saying, "It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?" (Rom. 8:33.) Again we hear the Master's word to the same class, "The Father himself loveth you." (John 16:27.) O, what rest and comfort it brings to our hearts, amongst the trials and vicissitudes of life, to realize in the depths of our hearts that these are not merely words but truths. But only as we are able to realize an obedient faith are we able to apply these gracious promises to ourselves or to rest therein. This same thought is expressed respecting Abraham (v. 6), "He believed in the Lord." The word in the original signifies more than mere belief; it signifies what only believers can fully comprehend, viz., a rest of faith in God.

"HE COUNTED IT FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS"

At first we are inclined to say, How strange it is that God should count our faith for anything – how simple, how easy a matter faith is! Why should it be valuable in God's sight? But the more we come to know ourselves the more we come to value faith, to realize that it is a scarce commodity in the world and even amongst Christians, professed believers. Under some conditions faith is very easy; indeed to disbelieve would be difficult. After this manner we understand nearly all the conditions of the Millennial age will be framed, so that the world in general will find it difficult to disbelieve in God, his power, his justice, his

love. Then the reward will be merely for the obedient, though some faith will doubtless be required as well. Now, on the contrary, the reward is merely on account of faith, though what obedience is possible is required, too. "According to thy faith be it unto thee," was our Master's expression, and it represents a general principle of divine dealing now.

God is now seeking for a faith-full people, and declares that those whom he will find will be peculiar in this respect from the majority; not many great, not many wise, not many learned according to the course of this world have and exercise this faith – chiefly the poor, rich in faith, may be heirs of the Kingdom. Let us seek to cultivate continually faith in the Lord, in his Word, in his providential care. This is not trusting in the creeds and the theories of men, which might be merely credulity, but trusting in the Word of the Lord, which liveth and abideth forever. As God counted such faith to Abraham as so much of righteousness, so he counts to us of this Gospel age, who are children of Abraham by faith. We are not righteous in a full, perfect, complete sense of that word. Even with our hearts turned to the Lord, and with the best of intentions, we cannot do the things that we would; but as to those who can exercise faith, and who do exercise it in harmony with divine righteousness to the best of their ability, God will count their efforts as though they are perfect! How gracious an arrangement! How lovingly we should show our appreciation by still greater faith and still harder endeavors to walk in the path of righteousness which faith dictates.

THE STARS OF HEAVEN, THE SANDS OF THE SEASHORE

In other statements of this promise or covenant God directed Abraham's mind to the stars and to the sand of the seashore and to the dust of the earth as illustrations of the numbers of his posterity. As yet Abraham had no child: every testimony of this kind was

therefore to him a testing of his faith, a suggestion that he should inquire first for a [R3945 : page 57] beginning of these matters; and as days and years passed by the testing of faith was increased, yet to our joy we find that Abraham was full of faith in these promises, never doubting the power of God in some way to accomplish all that he had given him reason to hope for. Here we find a lesson for ourselves. Other promises have been made to us, some of which seem to be utterly impossible of attainment. Shall our faith stagger and shall we begin to doubt? or shall we hold fast to the Word of the Lord, nothing wavering, nothing doubting? In order to do so we must discriminate clearly between the words of man and the Word of God, so that we may reject the words of man, resting nothing upon their promises, but our entire weight of trust must rest upon the Word of the Lord.

How solicitous this should make us to have before our minds clearly and distinctly just what things God has promised to them that love him. In accord with this fact we find that God's most earnest and loyal children are continually desiring to grow in grace and to grow in knowledge of him through his Word and through his providences, and that more and more they are cutting and drifting away from the creeds and theories of men, those which appear to be good and those which are manifestly vile, evil, injurious. The Scriptural statement is, respecting all such things, "If they speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isa. 8:20.) Hence the Scriptures again say that those who have nothing but their own dreams and fancies to preach may do so, but those who have the Word of the Lord should preach it and not themselves nor their fancies and dreams. – Jer. 23:28.

In the light of the New Testament we may see more in these various promises than Abraham or others not thus enlightened by the holy Spirit. We can see that the spiritual seed of Abraham, Christ and the Church, are represented in this simile of his seed

being as the stars of heaven, and we also see that the other part of the statement – that his seed shall be as the sand of the seashore – will have a fulfilment in Abraham's natural posterity, the Hebrew people, [R3945 : page 58] and in that still larger class of all nations referred to in the statement, "I have constituted thee a father of many nations." (Gen. 17:5.) How this deeper, clearer view of the promise enlarges the horizon of our eyes of understanding, and enables us to grasp with more and more distinctness the lengths and breadths and heights and depths of the love of God, which is yet to be manifested to every creature of our race, giving all opportunity of becoming children of Abraham – of full faith in and obedience to God. For that glorious opportunity the Apostle declares the whole creation is groaning and travailing, waiting until now – waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God, and, more than this, waiting until the sons of God are selected, tested, accepted and then manifested in glory.

THE INHERITANCE OF CANAAN

It is proper to speak of an earthly and a heavenly Canaan, but it is a mistake common to too many to apply all the promises of God that are yet future to the heavenly. There are earthly promises still unfulfilled, and one of these is referred to in our lesson (v. 7). The Lord here distinctly informed Abraham again that he intended to give that land to him and his posterity. That there might be no doubt as to the literalness of this, the Lord said to Abraham on another occasion, Lift up now thine eyes and look to the north and south and east and west, for all the land thou seest to thee will I give it and to thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession. (Gen. 13:14; 17:8.) How could the land Abraham saw be the heavenly city, which neither he nor we have ever seen? To make the matter doubly sure we have the word of Stephen on the subject (Acts 7), who declares that it was the literal land, and yet that Abraham had not received so much as to set his foot upon, but that he had faith that he would get that land, and Stephen also had faith

that it would ultimately be given to Abraham and his posterity. Our faith is and should be the same. Abraham is to have a grand portion, and the land of Palestine is to be an element of his blessing and inheritance. True, we read that Abraham dwelt in tents and not in a city, with walls, etc., for his protection; he was thus a pilgrim and a stranger, with no continuing city. He would not, like Lot, live in Sodom, for he desired a better country, even a heavenly. That is to say, he was waiting for the time that God intended that he should inherit this promise, anticipating the establishment of God's Kingdom at the second coming of our Lord, and preferring the solidity, the establishment, the security of that city, thinking the security of any earthly city of small account. And we see that in this he judged rightly. He was safer where he was, with God for his companion and divine promises for the walls of his salvation, than he could have been in any earthly city. Surely the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God, will be established with great power and glory, and nothing shall injure and destroy in all the Lord's holy Kingdom. Then Abraham's desires and anticipations will have been realized, and the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God.

If we would examine the various promises in detail they are that the land of Canaan should be the heritage of Abraham and of his seed forever; that he should have a son who would be his heir and inherit the promises; that his seed, descendants, would ultimately be as the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven, innumerable; that he should be the father of a great nation; that he should be the father of many nations, and that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

"WHEREBY SHALL I KNOW?"

Abraham had already testified his faith in God's promises in a general way. He did not doubt them, but when now the Lord

reiterated the fact that the land was to be his, he thought it not improper to ask for some word indicating the way in which the blessing should come – "O, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? What outward signs and evidences will help my faith to grasp these great promises you have made to me and which I thoroughly believe?" It was no more a sin for Abraham to ask the Lord to confirm and strengthen his faith than it would be for us to ask the same for ourselves. And God seems ever ready to help the trustful. How many assistances to faith he gives us without chiding when we come to him in a trustful and faithful attitude of mind. This is illustrated in our day by the difference in the Lord's treatment of those who look skeptically upon the Scriptures, the Bible, and those who look upon it from the standpoint of faith. The first mentioned find plenty to establish their skepticism; all the higher critics, the educated of the world, are in their company. On the other hand, those who are looking at the Word from the standpoint of faith and trust are blessed; to them it is opened – "He that seeketh findeth."

God at once gave Abraham his oath in confirmation of the promise. By a peculiar method God bound himself to Abraham by what is termed the "covenant of blood." A full description of it is given in the lesson: a heifer of three years, a she-goat of three years, a ram of three years, a turtle dove and a young pigeon were sacrificed, and the Lord represented himself as passing between the parts of these sacrificed animals, and was thus swearing by a covenant or sacrifice of life-blood to the promise he had given. The Lord was represented by a lamp of fire.

Then came the answer to Abraham's question, "Whereby shall I know? Give me some of the particulars relating to the matter of how my posterity shall inherit. Give me a view of the future." The Lord did give Abraham a glance into the future of his people, saying, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them: and they shall

afflict them four hundred years." This need not be understood to mean that Israel would be in bondage for four hundred years more that they would be afflicted all the years they would be in a strange land. Rather the thought seems to be that not until four hundred years would his posterity return to that land to inherit it according to the promise; that in the meantime they would suffer rigors, hardships, be in servitude, suffer affliction. The punishment upon the nation holding them in servitude is also mentioned – the Lord would judge them, and after four hundred years the seed of Abraham would come out of bondage with great substance and very rich. It would be in the fourth generation, we are told, that his descendants would return to Canaan, and an explanation of why the long delay is given in part in the statement, "The iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full": as though **[R3945 : page 59]** the Lord had said to Abraham, The Amorite has a prior hold upon this land, but I know the outcome with them, that they will get worse and worse and that eventually it will be the course of justice toward them to expel them – but not yet; the time for the change is not ripe. So long as they follow a reasonable course they will be permitted to remain, but when their cup of iniquity is full the land shall then be turned over to your posterity forever.

Abraham was not told how long it would be before his posterity would go into that captivity which would end in four hundred years at the fourth generation; he was merely told that it would not occur during his lifetime – "Thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace, thou shalt be buried in a good old age"; none of these calamities can come upon your posterity while you still live. We remember the fulfilment of this prediction; that for a time Abraham's posterity **[R3946 : page 59]** dwelt in Canaan as he himself had done, in tents, without seeking an earthly city or government. We remember that the famine drove them out of Canaan and they went down into Egypt as the guests of Pharaoh and Joseph, Abraham's grandson, who was then governor of Egypt through a divine arrangement. We remember that while matters

went peaceably for a time, by and by Joseph died and Pharaoh died, and then began one hundred and ninety-eight years of servitude and affliction, which continued until the Lord sent Moses and delivered Israel at the close of the 400 years mentioned in our lesson.

LESSONS FOR THE SPIRITUAL SEED

We may be sure that the horror of great darkness and the coming down of the fires to devour the sacrificed carcasses represented more than merely the dark picture of the servitude of Abraham's natural seed before they should go back to Palestine. We may be sure that the Lord, who made this covenant, had more in mind the spiritual seed than the natural. The Apostle Paul tells us so, for referring to this Oath-Bound Covenant he declares, "God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the unchangeableness of his promise, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable [unchangeable] things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor to our souls both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that which is within the vail." (Heb. 6:17-19.) The holy Spirit here, through the Apostle's pen, informs us that this oath was given to Abraham, not solely on his own account, as might appear, but specially on account of us, the spiritual heirs, the heirs of promise. The Apostle points out that Christ is the great inheritor, and that we who are Christ's are joint-heirs with him in this covenant promise, and that thus through Christ and the Church the entire promise will be made effective to Abraham and his natural seed as well as to all the families of the earth.

The darkness of that hour suggests to us the sufferings of this present time, the fiery furnace of affliction, the "better sacrifices" established in and upon the merit of our dear Redeemer's death and the ultimate great blessing that is to follow. Now what we

have is still a hope. Abraham is dead; his natural posterity have failed to attain the blessing; the higher favor secured by our Lord Jesus through his own obedience unto death has been extended to the faithful of the Jews and the faithful of every nation, whom the Father has drawn through his grace and truth, and yet we have this promise as a hope, but it is anchored to Christ, who is within the veil, a spirit being. By faith we realize a relationship to him, and that the darkness and suffering of this present time will soon be ended; by faith we realize that the glorious things which God hath in reservation for them that love him far more than overbalance the trials and difficulties of the pilgrim journey; by faith we see that as soon as the entire body of the Anointed One shall be completed and glorified, then a great blessing is due to begin with Israel after the flesh, and to extend through them also to every creature. Ah, how gracious is our Lord's provision! How kind for him to give us such a strong consolation through not only his repeated testimony of the truthfulness of this great matter, but also of his oath which confirms, secures, makes positive every element of the promise! What manner of persons ought we to be in all manner of holy conversation and godliness! What more could the Lord say to us than he has said?
