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PREPARING FOR THE KINGDOM

– LUKE 1:5-23. – JANUARY 7. –

"Without faith it is impossible to please God." – Hebrews 11:6.

OUR BEREAN STUDY course for the year has been mapped out by the International Committee. It constitutes a very thorough investigation of our Lord's earthly life, from His birth to His ascension. Today's study very appropriately calls for investigation of God's dealings and promises up to the birth of John the Baptist, the Redeemer's forerunner and herald.

Four thousand years before the birth of Jesus, God declared that the Seed of the woman would bruise the Serpent's head. This dark saying we now see signifies that sin with all its work of havoc in the world is to be offset and destroyed in due time and that the power of God to this end will operate through a wonderful Son of the disobedient Eve. Centuries passed with no sign of a fulfilment of this promise. Our race became more degraded and lapsed more and more into unbelief. Then Enoch was born, of the line of Seth. "He walked with God" and was used as a Divine mouthpiece to give a further prophecy, saying, "Behold, the Lord cometh with myriads of His holy ones, to execute judgment (justice) in the earth." – Jude 14,15.

Another thousand years elapsed before God made any further suggestion of His benevolent intention of giving the world a fresh trial or judgment. Then to Abraham, the friend of God, He made known more fully still the hope of the world – the Gospel. God declared to Abraham His intention to bless all the families of the earth, and secondly, that this blessing upon mankind would come to them through Abraham's posterity: "In thee and in thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." – Gen. 12:3.

This statement to Abraham, St. Paul pronounces the first Gospel message, because the other statements were so vague as not to make certain human recovery. Sin and the Serpent might have been destroyed without the seed of the woman being specially blessed, and the judging of mankind mentioned by Saint Enoch implied, but did not positively say, that human blessing would result. The message to Abraham, however, was explicit – "All the families of the earth shall be blessed." See Gal. 3:8.

St. Paul reminds us that God not only declared His coming blessing, but that He made oath to the same. God's oath was not necessary to Abraham. He confidently believed; but, as St. Paul said, the oath was for *our* sake. The fulfilment of the promise would be so *long deferred* that we, who are so specially interested in it, might have feared some change in the Divine Program. St. Paul assures us that the oath was in order that, "by two immutable things (God's Word and God's oath), we might have strong consolation (we, the Church), who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us (in 'the good tidings', the promise), which hope we have as an anchor to our souls, sure and steadfast, within the veil, whither our Forerunner has for us entered." (Hebrews 6:18-20.) We see, then, by the Apostle's words, that the Abrahamic promise or Covenant has not yet been fulfilled – it is still an anchor for our faith.

SEEKING ABRAHAM'S SEED

Ishmael was not the heir of the promise, but Isaac was; Esau was not, but Jacob was. Finally, all of Jacob's family were accepted as Abraham's seed, and in due time they were all baptized into Moses in the sea and the cloud and became heirs of the promise, on condition that they would keep the Law given at Mt. Sinai. Obedience to the requirements of that Law would give them eternal life, and forthwith the approved ones would be God's agents in fulfilling the promise – in "blessing all the families of the earth."

But, imperfect like all the remainder of our race under the death sentence, the Israelites were unable to keep the perfect Law of God; hence they all died, like the remainder of the race – because they were sinners. As Jesus said, none of you keepeth the Law; as St. Paul said, "By the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in God's sight." Nevertheless, the endeavor of the Jews to obey their Law brought a great blessing upon them; though some were hypocritical and said prayers, not from the heart, others were "Israelites indeed in whom was no guile."

The heart-loyalty of the "Israelites indeed" God appreciated, and they were granted the privilege at Pentecost of stepping from the house of Moses, as faithful servants, into the house of Christ, as faithful sons. (Heb. 2:5,6.) "To as many as received Him (Jesus), to these gave He liberty to become sons of God." (John 1:12.) They were accepted into this sonship after Jesus had laid down His life sacrificially, had been raised from the dead to the divine nature, and had ascended far above angels, principalities and powers to God's right hand of favor and had appeared as the Advocate for all "Israelites indeed," all willing to walk in His steps.

OTHER GRACIOUS PROMISES

All of God's promises were to Abraham and his seed (his natural seed primarily). Consequently all through the Jewish Age, while they as a people were trying to commend themselves as worthy to be the Seed of Abraham, by endeavoring to keep the Law, God spoke to them prophetically. He informed them that it was His intention ultimately to make a New Covenant with them, still better than the one which Moses mediated. Under that New Covenant He would take away their sins and iniquities; but He did not tell them how these would be cancelled; that they would be cancelled through the merit of "better sacrifices" than those which they offered through the Law year by year.

God assured them that this New Covenant would have a Mediator who would be higher than Moses. Of that Mediator Moses prophesied, saying, "A Prophet shall the [R4940 : page 458] Lord your God raise up unto you from amongst your brethren, like unto me (I am a type of Him); Him shall ye hear in all things – and whosoever will not obey that Prophet shall be destroyed." (Acts 3:23.) That greater Mediator would be the One by whom they would be really helped up to a place where they could keep the Divine Law perfectly and be used of God in blessing all the earth. – Jer. 31:31.

How the Israelites longed thereafter for the New Covenant with the better Mediator, whom they styled Messiah, or the Anointed of God! Hearken again to God's message respecting this glorious Messiah, the Mediator of the New Covenant; He says, "Behold, I send you the Messenger of the Covenant, whom you delight in (the One whom you have been so long praying for, the One through whose assistance you will be enabled to keep My Law and to become My agents in the instruction and blessing of the world); but who may abide the day of His coming and who shall stand when He appeareth, for He is like fuller's soap and a refiner's fire? And He shall sit to refine the sons of Levi that they may offer an acceptable sacrifice." – Malachi 3:1-3.

Thus the Israelites had the precious promise respecting the coming of the Messiah – and not only so, but intimations that there would be special trials and difficulties on those living at that time. Naturally every mother amongst the Israelites longed for the birth of a son, hoping that she might be honored as the parent of the Seed of the woman, who would bruise the Serpent's head – the great One of Abraham's seed through whom, by some unknown arrangement or process, a great blessing would come upon the sons of Levi, upon Israel and through these upon all the nations of the earth.

These promises led up to and culminated in the birth of John the Baptist, the incidents of which constitute the study of today. He was

not to be Messiah, but His herald. He was not born of a miraculous conception of the Holy Spirit and without human father, but He was announced by a special messenger of God, as our lesson most beautifully tells. If Zacharias' faith was tested, it was found strong and was assisted by his nine-months' experience of dumbness. Thus did God prepare the way before sending His only begotten Son to be man's Redeemer.

