

# The Once and Future Israel

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## A Journey Of Faith

Forty centuries ago the only true God spoke to a man in southern Mesopotamia and started him on a journey which his descendants are pursuing to this day.

Our story begins in the western Asian country we know today as Iraq, in the region between two ancient rivers called the Tigris and the Euphrates. These twin rivers flow down from the high mountains of Turkey, far to the northwest, cross through Syria, and finally meet in a swamp in southern Iraq, from which point they flow together into the Persian Gulf.

Between these two rivers is the Babylonian plain, a fertile land that the ancient Greeks named Mesopotamia ("land between the rivers"). Here, 5,000 years ago the first cities of history appeared, clustered together around the mouth of the Euphrates.

Among these cities was Ur of the Chaldees, capital city of an empire which by the year 2,100 B.C. had risen to supremacy in this ancient land.

In this city of Ur, somewhere around 2,000 B.C., a man named Terah, a descendant of Noah's son Shem, and thus a Semite, and a descendant of Eber (Heber), and thus a Hebrew, became the father of three sons. To one of his sons, a man we know as Abraham, God said: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3).

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing nineteen centuries ago, said this man Abraham "was a person of great sagacity, both for understanding all things and persuading his hearers, and not mistaken in his opinions; for which reason he began to have higher notions of virtue than others had, and he determined to renew and to change the opinion all men happened then to have concerning God; for he was the first that ventured to publish this notion, that there was but one God, the Creator of the universe. . . . For which doctrines, when the Chaldeans and other people of Mesopotamia raised a tumult against him, he thought fit to leave that country; and at the command, and by the assistance of God, he came and lived in the land of Canaan."

"By faith. . . he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8).

Abraham's journey of faith took him more than 1,000 miles through the Fertile Crescent, the chief route of trade and transportation that led northward through the valley between the Tigris and the Euphrates, westward to Syria between the Arabian desert and the northern mountains, and southward down the Mediterranean coast into the land of Palestine.

Throughout the years of his travels, Abraham was spoken to many times by the Creator of the universe, in what were surely some of the most extraordinary conversations ever conducted between God and man. The agreement God made with Abraham is what some theologians call the Abrahamic Covenant. In sum, this covenant contained four key promises, all of them conceived in the heart of God before the foundations of the world and all of them destined to find their fulfillment through the line of descent of Abraham's son Isaac, who was himself the child of promise. These amazing promises were:

1. The promise to make the descendants of Abraham into a great nation.
2. The promise of a great posterity.

3. The promise that Abraham's descendants would inherit the land of Canaan.
4. Above all, the promise of the Messiah.

To Abraham, coming out of a country of primitive, pagan beliefs, these encounters with the one true God must have been awe-inspiring experiences. To this one man, and to his descendants, God promised things that had never been heard of or dreamed of or imagined in all the prior history of the world.

It was impossible for Abraham to comprehend the breadth and depth of all that was involved in such promises, and impossible for him to see their fulfillment in his lifetime. For these were promises that were to encompass all of the centuries of history that lay ahead, and to go on into eternity. They were promises that were to turn the world upside down, promises so overwhelming in their nature and extent that a lesser man than Abraham would have collapsed before them in doubt and disbelief.

And yet Abraham staggered not at the promises of God but was convinced that God was fully able to perform what he had promised (Rom. 4:20,21). He believed God and it was imputed to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:22, Gal. 3:6). and God gave to him and his descendants the everlasting sign of circumcision, as a seal of the righteousness of his faith (Gen. 17:13, Rom. 4:11).

He had no religious precedents to lean on to bolster his faith, no doctrinal guidance to comfort him, no books or tape cassettes to strengthen him with reassuring testimonies, no pastor or elders to turn to for counsel.

In the absence of such assistance, he just believed.

And it worked.

In God's time, Abraham went to his fathers in peace; he lived 175 years and "died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 25:7,8) but the pathways that he set out upon so long ago are still trodden today by those who are his descendants. And the story of the promises God made to Abraham, and the amazing record of their continuing fulfillment to this present day, will live forever.

Further along in our study we will see the remarkable operation of these promises in our own time, nearly 40 centuries after Abraham's day, but first our search concerns itself with the fulfillment of those promises for the Israel that once was.

## **A Great Nation**

The first promise God made to Abraham was the promise to give his descendants national greatness and supremacy. God told Abraham that if he left the country he was in and went to the land that God would show him, "I will make of thee a great nation" (Gen. 12:2).

Was God faithful to perform that which he had spoken? Yes, some 400 years after his covenant with Abraham this promise was fulfilled. Abraham, of course, did not live to see this fulfillment but God had shown him there would be a 400-year delay (Gen. 15:13,14). And besides speaking to Abraham of the *time* of fulfillment, he also spoke to Abraham's grandson Israel, the son of Isaac, of the *place* of fulfillment.

"Go down into Egypt," the Lord told Israel in the visions of the night, "for I will there make of thee a great nation" (Gen. 46:3).

This remarkable promise was fulfilled under the leadership of Moses as the Israelites came forth out of bondage in Egypt, and under Joshua as they achieved their mighty victories in the

land of Canaan. Moses testified that God caused the other nations to respect the greatness of Israel, that he “put the dread of thee and the fear of thee upon the nations that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear report of thee, and shall tremble, and be in anguish because of thee” (Dt. 2:25).

And in exhorting the Israelites to obedience to the God of Abraham. Moses said, “Surely this *great nation* is a wise ‘end 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” (Dt. 4:6,7)?

Similarly, under Joshua the great nation of Israel struck terror into the hearts of all the inhabitants of Canaan, causing their courage to melt and making them faint with fear (Josh. 2:9-11). Chapters 8 through 12 of the book of Joshua testify to the unmistakable greatness of the nation of Israel as it marched triumphantly through the land of Canaan.

And King David, looking back on those victories many years later, was moved to cry out to the Lord: “What one nation in the earth is like thy people Israel, whom God went to redeem to be his own people, to make thee a name of greatness and terribleness, by driving out nations from before thy people” (1 Chr. 17:21).

Promise fulfilled? Yes, for the Israel that once was—but a greater fulfillment lay ahead for the future Israel.

## **A Great Posterity**

The second promise God made to Abraham was the promise that his descendants would be too numerous to count.

In Old Testament language this promise was described in several different ways. In his first expression of the promise, God said, “I will make thy seed as *the dust of the earth*: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered” (Gen. 13:16).

The second time, the Lord said, “Look now toward heaven, and tell *the stars*, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, so shall thy seed be” (Gen. 15:5).

On a third occasion, God promised that he would multiply Abraham’s seed “*as the sand which is upon the sea shore*” (Gen. 22:17).

Now that might have seemed almost like a cruel joke to Abraham. Because he and his wife Sarah had no children of their own when their journey began, they had brought Abraham’s nephew Lot along with them, and by the time the Lord promised that Abraham’s seed would be as numerous as the dust of the earth, Abraham was already getting old and he and Sarah still had no children of their own.

On the occasion of God’s further declaration that Abraham’s seed would be as the stars of heaven, Abraham had been complaining that he still had no heir except the steward of his house, Eliezer of Damascus (Gen. 15:2). Later, when God told Abraham he would multiply him exceedingly (Gen. 17:2) and make him “exceeding fruitful” (Gen. 17:6), Abraham was 99 and still had fathered no child with Sarah. At that point, as we can appreciate, Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and suggested, tactfully but unsuccessfully, that God establish his promises with Ishmael, the 13-year-old son born to Abraham by Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid of Sarah.

But the final stunning blow must have come *after* the birth of Isaac, the child of promise miraculously born to Abraham and Sarah when he was 100 and she was 90. Suddenly, despite all the promises he had received of a great posterity through the line of Isaac, Abraham was told by

God to “take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:2). In that dramatic moment, torn between obedience to God and his great love for his son, Abraham again staggered not. He didn’t understand fully what was happening perhaps but he chose to trust and obey his God.

And then, after the Lord spared Isaac’s life, Abraham could really believe it when God told him, for the final time, that his descendants would be numerous as the sand on the sea shore.

Was God faithful to perform that which he had spoken? Yes, we have the testimony of many witnesses to prove it. For example, Solomon said, “Thou hast made me king over a people like *the dust of the earth* in multitude” (2 Chr. 1:9).

Similarly, Moses said to Israel in his day, “The Lord your God hath multiplied you, and behold, ye are this day as *the stars of heaven* for multitude” (Dt. 1:10) and the writer of the book of Hebrews agreed, saying, “Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as *the stars of the sky* in multitude” (Heb. 11:12).

And finally we read that during the reign of Solomon “Judah and Israel were many as *the sand which is by the sea* in multitude” (1 Ki. 4:20), with the writer of Hebrews again concurring that there sprang from Abraham descendants as innumerable “as *the sand which is by the sea shore*” (Heb. 11:12).

Promise fulfilled? Yes, for the Israel that once was—but a greater fulfillment lay ahead for the future Israel.

## **The Promised Land**

The third promise was the promise that Abraham’s descendants would inherit the land of Canaan.

God repeated this promise to Abraham many times. The first time he said, “Unto thy seed will I give this land” (Gen. 12:7).

A second time he said, “Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever” (Gen. 13:14,15).

And again, “I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it” and “unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:7,18).

And finally, “I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8).

That had to be one of the biggest real estate deals of all time. To Abraham, recently arrived in a strange land and surrounded by antagonistic pagans, it might have appeared overly optimistic at first even to hope for enough land on which to graze his flocks and herds, and erect his tents. But every time the Lord mentioned the land he and his seed were to inherit, its size seemed to increase, until finally it was *all* the land of Canaan from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt. Again, however, Abraham staggered not at the promise; he simply built altars to the Lord, offered sacrifices, and obeyed, and believed.

Was God faithful to perform that which he had spoken? Yes, hundreds of years later the descendants of Abraham went on to possess in peace all the land which the Lord had promised to them. This is the testimony of the scriptures:

“And the Lord gave unto Israel *all* the land which he swore to give unto their fathers; and they

possessed it, and dwelt therein. And the Lord gave them rest round about, according to all that he swore 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. 21:43-45).

Did the land they ruled really reach all the way from Egypt to the river Euphrates, as promised by Genesis 15:18? Well, 1 Kings 4:21 says that "Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the river unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt." Was that river the Euphrates? The scriptures say it was because Solomon "had dominion over all the region on this side the river, from Tiphseh" (1 Ki. 4:24), and Tiphseh was located on the Euphrates in Mesopotamia.

Promise fulfilled? Yes, for the Israel that once was—but a greater fulfillment lay ahead for the future Israel.

## **The Messiah**

The fourth promise God made to Abraham was the promise of the Messiah.

This greatest of all the promises was not expressed to Abraham, or to Isaac or Israel, in those terms, of course, but the true meaning of God's words has long ago been shown to us.

God said to Abraham, Isaac and Israel, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18, 26:4, 28:14), and the apostle Paul, "of the stock of Israel" (Phil. 3:5), was shown by divine revelation the identity of the seed in whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Paul wrote: "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).

Promise fulfilled? Yes, for all the world. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16).

Of all the promises to Abraham, this fourth and greatest promise is the one we must treat with the most care and reverence. We have demonstrated how the other three were fulfilled for the Israel that once was, and we have referred to the greater fulfillments that lay far beyond Abraham's day, fulfillments beyond anything the mind of man could have imagined or the heart of man could have desired in the ancient land of Canaan 4,000 years ago.

But when we speak of the great promise of the Messiah, we must recognize that God has fulfilled that promise once and forever in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God who came to bring salvation to "as many as received him" (Jn. 1:12).

Having thus confirmed through the scriptures the fulfillment of all the promises made to Abraham, we will now explore some further promises made to Old Testament Israel at later stages in its national life. Eventually we will see that these additional promises also contained amazing implications for the future Israel.

## **An Holy Nation**

The second book of Moses, called Exodus, says that 70 children of Israel went down into Egypt where they "were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7).

They came into Egypt thinking to share in its wealth and bounty through their connections with the high-ranking Joseph but in time they found Egypt to be a hard taskmaster. “There arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Ex. 1:8), and, living in a land that was not theirs, the Israelites were subjugated and afflicted as God had told Abraham they would be (Gen. 15:13).

But when the promised time drew nigh, God sent Moses as a deliverer, and with great signs and wonders he led them out of Egypt to lead them into the promised land of Canaan.

Protected by the Passover lamb’s blood on their doorposts, guided by the Lord in a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, the children of Israel passed miraculously through the waters of the Red Sea and were saved from the hosts of Pharaoh. In the third month they came into the wilderness of Sinai where God, speaking to Moses on the mountain, made them a remarkable promise:

“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” (Ex. 19:5,6).

Thus to the promises made hundreds of years earlier to their ancestor Abraham, the Israelites could add another promise made to them in their own day. This further revelation of God’s eternal purpose is called by some theologians the Mosaic Covenant. In it, God promised the children of Israel that if they were faithful and obedient they would occupy a position unique among all the nations of the earth.

To this multitude of tired, hot and dusty pilgrims, to these men and women who had just escaped from long years of slavery, whose lives had been “bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field” (Ex. 1:14), to this Israel of old was granted the opportunity to stand in a special relationship to the God of the whole universe, to be unto him “a people of inheritance” (Dt. 4:20) and to be made “high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour” (Dt. 26:19).

Could they possibly have understood all they were offered? Crawling out from the blackness and rubble of slavery beneath which they had been buried, could they grasp the significance of this amazing proposition? Here was the Lord of all creation telling them that although all the earth was his, and all the nations were made by him, nevertheless he would elevate their nation to a position above all the others.

They would be his special treasure, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Unlike the other people and other nations in the earth, they would be under the reign and authority of God, not man; they would seek to do God’s will, not man’s; they would know the blessings of heaven in their lives, not just the temporal, earthly blessings that fade and fail to satisfy.

It was a promise unique in all the history of the world. Here was God himself saying, Have I got a deal for you! This was the grand prize of all time, the offer of the whole world, and heaven, too, in return for nothing—but obedience.

Not surprisingly, the Israelites accepted.

“And all the people answered together and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8).

The scriptures don’t tell us how long the Israelites weighed the proposed arrangement before accepting, or whether they fully understood all the implications of the offer God was making to them, or all the implications of the obedience God would require from them. We only know they signed on the dotted line, and said they would do *all* that the Lord had spoken.

It was easier said than done.

Not too much later, while Moses was 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain receiving the commandments, judgments and ordinances from the Lord, the people so corrupted themselves by making and worshipping a golden calf (Ex. 32:1-8) that it was necessary for Moses to direct the slaying of about 3,000 of them (Ex. 32:28).

That incident, of course, was but one example of the failure and idolatry that plagued the steps of the Israel that once was throughout the course of its national existence. Because of disbelief that generation of Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness and failed to enter the promised land of Canaan.

But the failures of the Israel of old did not thwart God's purposes. He who has known the end from before the beginning was not surprised by the frailties and weaknesses of human nature. Though he oft would have gathered the people to himself as a hen gathers its chicks, and oft was rejected by them, nevertheless God's purpose could never fail.

And so today, against all odds, the Israel of God is firmly established as the holy nation which is his peculiar treasure, and through that nation his eternal and unfailing purpose is being consummated.

### **Give Us a King**

From the time of Moses, about 15 centuries before Christ, to the time of Samuel, about 11 centuries before Christ, the history of the nation of Israel swung like a pendulum between sin and repentance, between idolatry and restoration.

As he had promised, God multiplied the descendants of Abraham, and made them a great nation, and gave them all the land of Canaan. But that nation which he had chosen to be special and holy constantly slid back from its high calling.

God raised up Joshua to lead the nation after the death of Moses, but after Joshua's death the people's sins led to eight years of oppression under the king of Mesopotamia (Jud. 3:8). Later, the Lord raised up Othniel to judge Israel but their sins after Othniel's death resulted in 18 years of oppression under the king of Moab (Jud. 3:14). Later, Ehud and Shamgar avenged Israel but after their deaths the sins of the nation brought on 20 years of oppression under the king of Canaan (Jud. 4:2,3). Deliverance came again through Deborah and Barak but after their time a renewed period of sin led to seven years of oppression by the Midianites (Jud. 6:1). Then Gideon delivered the Israelites but later their renewed idolatry brought on 18 years of oppression by the Philistines and Ammonites (Jud. 10:7,8). Then came the time of Eli, during which their transgressions led to an additional 40 years of oppression under the Philistines (Jud. 13:1).

Finally Samuel was sent to judge the people but when he was old his sons, who walked not in his ways, were allowed to assist in governing the nation. Their ill management of affairs was the excuse the Israelites used to demand "a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). The request for a king displeased Samuel but God said to him, "Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me, and served other gods, so do they also unto thee. Now therefore hearken unto their voice: howbeit yet protest solemnly unto them, and show them the manner of the king that shall reign over them" (1 Sam. 8:6-9).

The Israelites had demanded a change of government, from a theocracy (the rule of God) to a

monarchy (the rule of a mere man), and in response God in his wrath gave them Saul, the son of Kish, to be their king. Although their wickedness was great in the sight of the Lord in asking for a king (1 Sam. 12:17), God told the Israelites through Samuel that if they would fear and obey the Lord (1 Sam. 12:14) and would follow and serve him with all their heart (1 Sam. 12:20), “the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people” (1 Sam. 12:22). But he warned that “if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king” (1 Sam. 12:25).

Thus the Lord’s mercy and patience still left the nation of Israel eligible to enjoy a special relationship with God, above all the other nations of the world, at the same low price of whole-hearted obedience and faithfulness.

And the second king God gave Israel was David, the son of Jesse, “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), and a man to whom the Lord made additional important promises. Like those we have already touched on, these further revelations of God’s eternal purpose deserve our careful study and attention, not only because of their past fulfillment for the old Israel but also because of their amazing future implications for the new Israel.

### **The Davidic Kingdom**

God took David from the sheepfolds and appointed him to feed his people according to the integrity of his heart and to guide them by the skillfulness of his hands (Ps. 78:70-72). He was 30 when he became king, and he ruled for 40 years.

David’s soul thirsted after God “as the hart panteth after the water brooks” (Ps. 42:1), and when he sat as king in his fine cedar house after the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies, it grieved him that the ark of God, symbolic of the presence of the Lord, merely dwelled within curtains in the tabernacle or tent that had been pitched for it.

David confided to Nathan the prophet his desire to build a “house,” or temple, for God to dwell in, and Nathan too hastily told him that was a good idea. That night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, however, and the prophet amended his advice to David to line up with the will of God. Looking back on the incident years later, David said:

“I had in mine heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and for the footstool of our God, and had made ready for the building: but God said unto me, thou shalt not build an house for my name, because thou hast been a man of war, and hast shed blood. . . .and he said unto me, Solomon thy son, he shall build my house” (1 Chr. 28:2,3,6).

Although he was denied permission to build the temple, David was overwhelmingly blessed by the Lord in many other ways. During his reign, and that of his son Solomon, the fame and fortune of the Israel of old reached their zenith. In trying to describe the prosperity of that kingdom the astonished queen of Sheba could only say (1 Ki. 10:7): “The half was not told me!” Nevertheless, the greatness and magnificence of that kingdom were destined to be far overshadowed in a later age by another kingdom.

David caught glimpses of that future kingdom, and shared his vision with us in the Psalms. He spoke of One who would reign as “the King of all the earth” (Ps. 47:7) and said his people “shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power: To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom” (Ps. 145:11,12). He described Zion, the city of that great King, as “beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth” (Ps. 48:2), and said the Lord had chosen it for his eternal dwelling place (Ps. 132:13,14).

The key set of promises made to David is called by some theologians the Davidic Covenant. In that covenant God promised that he would build David a house, and that David's house, and kingdom, and throne "shall be established for ever" (2 Sam. 7:16). And God promised that after David's death he would "set up thy seed after thee. . . and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever" (2 Sam. 7:12,13).

"For ever" turned out to be a relatively brief period of time, however. Within a few hundred years Israel went into captivity, the temple built by Solomon was destroyed, and the nation never again saw its kingdom and throne rise to supremacy and greatness. Again, the reason was disobedience. The understanding between God and the Israelites was still the same as that initially proclaimed by Samuel at the start of the monarchy. It was conditioned on the big if of obedience: "If ye will fear the Lord, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel. . . ." (1 Sam. 12:14).

David thoroughly understood this requirement and carefully passed it along to Solomon and the Israelites. Shortly before his death he warned Solomon to "keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself: That the Lord may continue his word which he spoke concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel" (1 Ki. 2:3,4).

Likewise, the Lord told Solomon that "if thou wilt walk before me, as David thy father walked, in integrity of heart, and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded thee, and wilt keep my statutes and judgments:

Then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man upon the throne of Israel. But if ye shall at all turn from following me, ye or your children, and will not keep my commandments and my statutes, which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods, and worship them:

Then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for my name, will I cast out of my sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all people" (1 Ki. 9:4-7).

Despite the subsequent decline and captivity of the nation of Israel, God's eternal purpose continued to unfold exactly as he had planned. The old kingdom might fade and pass away but a new and greater kingdom would be manifested in a later age. The throne of David might go unoccupied for many centuries but a greater King would one day ascend to it. The temple of Solomon might be demolished but a new and greater temple would yet appear.

These fulfillments of God's promises, long after the time of David and Solomon, are the miracles we are privileged to witness in our lifetime. The scriptures guarantee that it is not just a possibility for this generation to see the kingdom and throne and temple; it is an absolute and remarkable certainty. An incredible thrill awaits each of us when we finally see God's chosen people reigning with Christ in his kingdom.

## **The Hebrew Prophets**

Although Israel reached the peak of its power and prosperity during the time of David and

Solomon, the signs of idolatry and decline soon appeared.

Solomon reigned for 40 years, at first wisely and well but later foolishly. In time he loved and married many women of the heathen nations, and when he was old “his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father” (1 Ki. 11:4).

Because Solomon failed to keep God’s covenants and statutes, and thus violated the condition of obedience under which the kingdom had been given to him, God in his anger took away 10 of the 12 tribes from his son Rehoboam, who succeeded him as king, and gave them to Jeroboam, Solomon’s servant. From that time until the Babylonian captivity the kingdom was divided, with Judah and Benjamin ruled by the successor kings of Rehoboam and the 10 tribes of Israel by the successor kings of Jeroboam.

Although God gave Jeroboam the same opportunity for greatness that he previously had given David and his successors, conditioned upon his obedience and faithfulness (1 Ki. 11:38), Jeroboam, like Rehoboam, quickly fell into idolatry. To dissuade his subjects from going to Jerusalem to worship in the temple built by Solomon, Jeroboam erected two calves of gold, one at Bethel and one at Dan, and there he led his subjects in idolatrous worship.

Over the next few centuries the two-tribe kingdom of Judah and the 10-tribe kingdom of Israel each had about 20 kings. Some of them attempted to be faithful to the Lord but each such revival was followed by a renewed outburst of idolatry, and the general trend of events was clearly toward decline and enslavement.

In the year 722 B.C., about 250 years after the kingdom was divided, the 10 tribes of Israel were taken into captivity by Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, and 136 years later, in 586 B.C., the kingdom of Judah met the same fate at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. In addition to carrying off the Jews to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar also laid waste the city of Jerusalem, after tearing down its walls, and destroyed the temple of Solomon.

During the terrible centuries of apostasy and decline that preceded the captivity, God spoke repeatedly to the people in the divided kingdoms through the mouths of his holy prophets. To those who faithfully followed after the God of their fathers, the prophets brought encouragement, strength and the promise of restoration; to those who rejected the Lord and followed after idols, the prophets promised the certain wrath of God.

In all of recorded time there has never been another era quite like that of the old Hebrew prophets. In the darkest days of Jewish history, undeterred by persecution and rejection, they thundered forth their warnings to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Their writings, stretching over approximately four centuries, fill nearly half of the books of the Old Testament. But the exhortations of the prophets are more than just entries in history’s notebook. Their mighty words leap from the ancient pages and call to mankind down through the corridors of time, and we can but stand in awe before the past fulfillments of their prophecies and watch with wonder their continuing fulfillments in this present day.

The great prophetic period of the Old Testament began with Samuel and ended with Malachi. John the Baptist also stood in the same line of prophets but for our present purposes we want to limit our study to the writing prophets of the Old Testament. These great messengers of God are generally considered to be 16 in number. Most of them prophesied in or to the kingdom of Judah, which had a longer existence as a kingdom, but Jonah, Amos and Hosea were prophets in the 10-tribe kingdom of Israel.

The names of the prophets and the approximate dates of the writing of their books were Joel,

ninth century B.C.; Jonah, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah, eighth century B.C.; Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Jeremiah, seventh century B.C.; Obadiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Haggai, sixth century B.C., and Malachi, fifth century B.C. The first 10 prophets wrote before the Babylonian captivity; Obadiah, Ezekiel and Daniel wrote during the captivity, and Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi wrote after the captivity.

In the chapters that follow we shall see the remarkable fulfillments of their prophecies for the Israel of old, and later we shall see the even more remarkable fulfillments for the new Israel.

## **Messianic Prophecies**

The coming of Christ as Saviour and King was the major message of the prophets. The scriptures affirm that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).

Many of the old Hebrew prophecies were directly Messianic in content, that is, they specifically foretold the person and ministry of the Lord Jesus. Others were indirectly associated with the same end; they were aimed at reviving and preserving the Israel of old until that day in the fullness of time when the Messiah should come forth from it.

In this latter group were prophecies of the return from captivity to the land of Palestine, the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and of the temple, and other prophecies regarding various institutions of Israel. The prophets’ words were frequently condemnatory, of course, in view of the apostasy and decline of the two kingdoms, but much of what they said was couched in gracious terms promising consolation and restoration.

There also were major passages that dealt with the Messiah’s future kingdom and the people chosen to reign with him there. The unique and influential position of those people in this twentieth century is, of course, the area of prophetic fulfillment we want to explore in detail in this book. But first we should study the past as a guide to the future, for the amazing fulfillments of the prophetic scriptures for the Israel of old arm us with a strong and certain assurance of their fulfillments for the new Israel.

The directly Messianic prophecies were the most important words uttered by the prophets. They spoke of One whose coming would bring, to all who received him, freedom from the bondage of the world, the flesh and Satan. They spoke of One in whom and through whom the Father’s eternal purpose would be realized. They spoke of One whose birth marked a dividing point in history, a time when B.C. yielded to A.D., a gracious time when “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14).

In prophesying the birth of Israel’s Messiah, more than 700 years before the occurrence of that momentous event, the prophet Isaiah said: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Is. 7:14).

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, pinpointed the exact place of birth of the Messiah: “But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2).

Later, during the Babylonian captivity, the prophet Daniel was shown the exact period of time that would pass until the appearance of the Messiah, and also that the Messiah would be killed before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (which occurred in A.D. 70). Only Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the requirements of that great prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27).

The prophets eloquently described the Messiah's dual ministry as both Saviour and King. For example, Zechariah spoke these words during the restoration from the Babylonian captivity: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass" (Zech. 9:9).

Regarding the Messiah's ministry as the Saviour of the world, Isaiah said: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (Is. 9:2). And: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (Is. 11:2).

And: "I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house" (Is. 42:6,7).

And: "The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. . . .to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. . . .to comfort all that mourn. . . .to give unto them beauty for ashes, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Is. 61:1-3).

Ezekiel, who like Daniel wrote during the captivity, also prophesied of the Messiah's ministry as Saviour of the world when he spoke of the shepherd who would come to seek out his sheep: "I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down.

"I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick" (Ezek. 34:15,16).

The prophets said that the Messiah would also come as a King. Isaiah declared that "unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever" (Is. 9:6,7).

Micah, as previously noted, said that the One who would come forth out of Bethlehem "is to be ruler in Israel" (Mic. 5:2).

Ezekiel prophesied that "David my servant shall be king over them. . . .David shall be their prince forever" (Ezek. 37:24,25), meaning, of course, the Greater David who would appear as the Messiah. Zephaniah referred to Christ as the coming King of Israel (Zeph. 3:15). And Zechariah said, "Behold the man whose name is The Branch. . . .he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne" (Zech. 6:12,13).

Perhaps the most famous prophecy of the Messiah's coming kingdom is contained in the book of Daniel. There we read of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of five kingdoms (Dan. 2:31-45), representing the respective world dominions of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, and the fifth kingdom which would be set up by the God of heaven. This latter kingdom, Daniel said, "shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever" (Dan. 2:44).

In addition to the prophecies of the Messiah's birth, and his ministry as Saviour and King, there were many other prophetic passages dealing with the Son of God. No verses of the Bible are more poignant than the prophetic scriptures which concern the Messiah's suffering and death.

Isaiah said that "his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons

of men. . . He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth” (Is. 52:14; 53:3-9) -

Perhaps you have discovered, or are in the process of discovering, that those are the things Christ suffered for you. But remember that all of us today who have received that revelation have had the testimony of history and the New Testament to guide us. Isaiah, on the other hand, was shows those things more than seven centuries before they occurred.

Zechariah also predicted Christ’s death: “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered” (Zech. 13:7).

These were a few of the many remarkable prophecies of the old Hebrew prophets directly related to the coming of the Messiah and fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Next we shall study some of the prophecies related indirectly to the Messiah, those aimed at restoring and preserving the Israel of old until it should bring forth the Son of God. “made of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3).

## **The Return to the Land**

The prophets accurately foretold the captivity into which the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were led. Long before it happened, Isaiah warned Hezekiah, king of Judah, that “the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left” (Is. 39:6).

Amos, writing at about the same time in the kingdom of Israel, said that because of injustices and sin “an adversary there shall be even round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee, and thy palaces shall be spoiled. As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be taken out” (Amos 3:11,12).

And Jeremiah, greatly hated by his generation for his bold declarations of the truth, said: “Therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words, Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the Lord, and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations. Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle” (Jer. 25: 8-10).

Nevertheless, the long years of captivity were not intended to mark an end to the Jewish nation; that final punishment was to be reserved until A .D. 70 at the hands of Titus and his

Roman armies. In the counsels of God it was still necessary to keep Old Testament Israel in existence for its highest and most exalted purpose, for it was the nation “of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all” (Rom. 9:5). And so, in addition to their warnings of judgment and captivity, the prophets spoke also of future blessing for the people of God, both in the Old Testament dispensation and in a new age that was yet to come.

Again, we will hold in abeyance our discussion of the unprecedented blessings that are the inheritance of God’s chosen people today while we briefly review the blessings promised to the people of the Israel of old.

The first of those blessings was the end of the captivity and the restoration to the land. There are many prophecies relating to that event but perhaps none is so vivid and expressive as Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones. In the descriptive and poetic language that was the trademark of the old Hebrew prophets, Ezekiel compared the Jews in captivity with the scattered and lifeless bones of dead men. He described the restoration of the Israelites to the land in terms of a resurrection; the dry bones would come together again, and be covered with sinews, flesh and skin, and life would be breathed into them (Ezek. 37:1-14). That this picture was representative of the restoration of the Israelites to their land is clear from the Lord’s words, spoken by Ezekiel, that “ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land” (Ezek. 37:14).

The word of the Lord to Ezekiel also referred to the two kingdoms in captivity as two sticks which would become one (Ezek. 37:15-19), which meant that after the return from captivity Israel and Judah “shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all” (Ezek. 37:22).

Ezekiel’s prophecy of the dry bones was given during the captivity, not too long before its fulfillment by the actual return of the Jews to their land, but many earlier prophecies dealt with the same subject. For example, long before the time of Ezekiel, the prophet Isaiah declared that “the Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob” (Is. 14:1).

And again, in a lyrical outburst, Isaiah prophesied: “Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head; they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away” (Is. 51:11).

And in Israel Amos uttered these prophetic words: “I will bring again (end) 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” (Amos 9:14,15).

Jeremiah not only predicted the eventual end of the captivity and the restoration to the land (Jer. 30:3) but also that the period of desolation and captivity for the city of Jerusalem would be seventy years, and that “when seventy years are accomplished, I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity” (Jer. 25:11,12).

Was God faithful to fulfill these and other prophecies of the return to the land? Yes, at the end of the time specified by Jeremiah, the king of Babylon was overthrown and a new king ordered the return of the Jews to Palestine.

And so new life was breathed into Ezekiel’s dry bones, and the captives who had wept by the river of Babylon where they could not sing the songs of Zion (Ps. 137:1-4), now joyously sang the words: “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.

Then was our mouth ruled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them” (Ps. 126:1,2). Prophecy fulfilled? Yes, for the Israel that once was—but a greater fulfillment lay ahead for the future Israel.

## **Rebuilding the City**

When Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem he laid the city waste and razed its walls to the ground. But the promise that the Jews would again build and inhabit Jerusalem was already indelibly inscribed on the calendar of prophetic events.

In one of the most remarkable passages in all of scripture, the Lord revealed to the prophet Isaiah 200 years in advance the name of the king who would order the return to the land and the rebuilding of the city. God singled out a future monarch who would be named Cyrus, and said of him: “He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid” (Is. 44:28).

Isaiah said the days would come when “they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities” (Is. 61:4).

Jeremiah prophesied the rebuilding of the city in these words: “Thus saith the Lord: Behold, I will bring again the captivity of Jacob’s tents, and have mercy on his dwelling-places; and the city shall be builded upon her own heap” (Jer. 30:18), and “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the city shall be built to the Lord from the tower of Hananeel unto the gate of the corner” (Jer. 31:38).

Later, the prophet Daniel, living among the captives in Babylon, “understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:2). Daniel thereupon fasted and prayed, confessing the sins of himself and his people, and petitioned the Lord to “let thine anger and thy fury be turned away from thy city Jerusalem, thy holy mountain” (Dan. 9:16). It was then that the angel Gabriel appeared to Daniel with the prophecy of the 70 weeks (490 years). Gabriel told Daniel that the restoration of Jerusalem was the first item on that 490-year prophetic agenda (Dan. 9:25).

Was the Lord faithful to fulfill the prophecies of the rebuilding of Jerusalem?

Yes, the man named Cyrus appeared on the stage of history right on cue as the king of Persia, the successor, with Darius the Mede, to the Babylonian empire that collapsed under its last king, Belshazzar. And Cyrus dutifully played out the script that had been written for him two centuries earlier. The stage directions for Cyrus, as delivered by Isaiah, were these: “Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates, and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob my servant’s sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me” (Is. 45:1-4). And again: “I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city” (Is. 45:13).

The specifics of this prophecy were remarkably fulfilled. While the Babylonian king Belshazzar and a thousand of his lords feasted in imagined security behind their gates and walls,

the armies of Cyrus dug a new channel for the Euphrates river and entered the city through the dry stream bed. The prophetic words, “I will loose the loins of kings,” found apt fulfillment when Belshazzar saw the moving fingers write the doom of his kingdom on the wall (Dan. 5:5, 25-28). For, “then the king’s countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another” (Dan. 5:6). Thus the invaders entered the gates of Babylon, and seized its treasures, and thus was the king of Babylon punished, as prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:12).

Cyrus was co-ruler with, and subordinate to, Darius for a brief period of time but in the first year that he ruled alone God stirred up his spirit and he made haste to proclaim throughout his kingdom the decree authorizing the return of the Jews to the land of their forefathers (Ezra 1:1-3). The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the problems encountered while the city was being re-built, in fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy that “the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times” (Dan. 9:25). The third chapter of Nehemiah describes the building program prophesied in Jeremiah 31:38.

Prophecy fulfilled? Yes, for the city that once was—but a greater fulfillment lay ahead.

### **Rebuilding the Temple**

The hope that the temple of Solomon would be rebuilt helped to sustain many pious Jews during the captivity in Babylon. They wept as they remembered the splendor and glory of the temple they once knew, and they dreamed of a new temple that would someday take its place.

The prophets had not said as much about the restoration of the temple, or of the sacrifices, oblations and burnt offerings, as they had about the return to the land and the rebuilding of the city. Still, there was enough evidence to fire the captives’ imagination with hope.

Isaiah and Micah, after all, had left them almost identical prophecies that said “it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob” (Is. 2:2,3; Mic. 4:1,2). (Admittedly, the Jews could not be sure that prophecy was for their time, that is, whether they were in “the last days,” nor whether the prophecy referred to a temple or to some form of governing authority.)

They also had the lengthy and detailed description of a temple given in the last nine chapters of Ezekiel (although there was no indication that the structure described there was to be built in their day).

And they could fall back on Daniel’s encounter with Gabriel, which was after the destruction of Solomon’s temple, because there Daniel was told that a future prince would “destroy the city and the sanctuary” (Dan. 9:26), thereby indicating that another temple had to be built. (But here, too, the time element was unsatisfactory. And the Jews did not want to hear about another temple being destroyed; they wanted to know when the second temple would be built.)

So their best hope again was Isaiah’s prophecy about the man called Cyrus, the one of whom the Lord said: “He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying. to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid” (Is. 44:28).

Was God faithful to perform that which he had spoken by Isaiah?

Yes, as we have seen, Cyrus acted with dispatch to fulfill the prophecies in which he was named. The proclamation he made throughout all his kingdom said: “The Lord God of heaven

hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God), which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:2,3).

“Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5-7). “And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it” (Ezra 6:14).

Prophecy fulfilled? Yes, for the temple that once was—but a greater fulfillment lay ahead.

### **The People of the Kingdom**

In the last few chapters we have seen the fulfillment of major prophecies concerning the return to the land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple after the Babylonian captivity. Many other institutions of pre-captivity Jewish life were similarly restored or reaffirmed, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell us, including the law, the feasts, the sabbath, the priesthood and the tithes and offerings.

As the doors of the Old Testament close behind us, however, it is obvious that there were two major areas of prophecy that saw no fulfillment in that former dispensation. The first and most important of these was the promise of the Messiah, which we have already studied. The second involved the people who were chosen to reign with him in his future kingdom. It seems fitting that we conclude this first part of our study with a look at what the Hebrew prophets had to say about those people because the remainder of this book will show how they, as the new Israel, play a pivotal role in the consummation of God’s eternal purpose.

The Old Testament seers painted a fascinating picture of the people of the future Israel. For example, Isaiah spoke of the names by which they would be called:

“They shall call thee, the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 60:14), and “trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord” (Is. 61:3), and “ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord, men shall call you the Ministers of our God” (Is. 61:6), and “thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah,” meaning, “the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married” (Is. 62:4), and “they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the Lord: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken” (Is. 62:12).

From the prophetic writings we can also piece together a full-length description of those men and women. They would have everlasting joy upon their heads (Is. 51:11). Their eyes and ears would be open to the things of the Lord, and their tongues would sing (Is. 35:5,6) with the voice of joy and gladness (Jer. 33:11). The word of the Lord would be in their mouth (Is. 51:16). The law of the Lord would be written in their hearts (Jer. 31:33). Their bones would “flourish like an herb” (Is. 66:14), and their feet would be “beautiful upon the mountains” (Is. 52:7).

The people of that future Israel would be dressed in beautiful garments (Is. 52:1), “as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels” (Is. 61:10). They would be a crown of glory, a royal diadem, in the hand of the Lord (Is. 62:3; Zech. 9:16; Mal. 3:17). “And out of them shall proceed

thanksgiving and the voice of them that make merry...and they shall not be few...and they shall not be small” (Jer. 30:19).

What would it be like in the place where they dwelled? Well, Isaiah prophesied that “Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit” (Is. 27:6), and “the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing. . . .in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water” (Is. 35:1,2,6,7). The prophet promised that “the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody” (Is. 51:3). Jerusalem shall be “a quiet habitation” (Is. 33:20) and the Lord “will extend peace to her like a river” (Is. 66:12). And “the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Is. 11:6).

Likewise, Ezekiel said the Lord “will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing” (Ezek. 34:25,26).

The prophets also spoke of what those people would do. Isaiah wrote that Zion would joyfully draw water out of the wells of salvation, would praise his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted,” and sing and shout to the Holy One of Israel for his greatness and his excellent works (Is. 12:3-6). They would be the ones who would carry the good tidings of salvation and of the reign of God (Is. 52:7).

Joel said they would “eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord” (Joel 2:26), and Jeremiah said they would “bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord” (Jer. 33:11).

Jeremiah said they would “sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord. . . .and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all” (Jer. 31:12), and “they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them” (Jer. 31:34).

Micah said they would “do justly” and “love mercy” and “walk humbly” with their God (Mic. 6:8), and Habakkuk said they would be the kind of people who, even if the crops and harvest failed completely, would yet rejoice in the Lord and joy in the God of their salvation (Hab. 3:17,18).

We could quote much more of the prophets’ testimony but the key point should already be clear. What the prophets foresaw was a people unlike any the world had seen before. Even as they mourned the failure of Old Testament Israel, the prophets caught the glorious vision of a future Israel—a holy nation, elect and chosen—the seed of Abraham who would be brought forth at the appointed time to inherit the promises.

## **A Confession**

Having said all those wonderful things about the new Israel—and perhaps having excited you about what the Jewish nation will be doing on the stage of history—I must now risk our fellowship by telling you that the holy nation, the new Israel, that I’ve been talking about is the

church of Jesus Christ.

Now please don't shut the book just yet, brother or sister. Give me a chance to show you what I mean. Let me try to convince you that this whole exercise, though admittedly sneaky, is nevertheless based on a fair and objective reading of the scriptures.

Let me try to demonstrate that you and your brothers and sisters in Christ, as the new and spiritual Israel, are the true heirs of the promises made to Abraham.

Let me try to prove to you that believers alone are the chosen people and holy nation of the Lord.

Let me try to show you that believers are reigning now with Christ in his kingdom, far above such relative lightweights as the nuclear powers of the twentieth century.

Let me try to demonstrate that believers in Christ are the people the old Hebrew prophets wrote about with such excitement and enthusiasm.

Today the search for identity is the consuming passion of life for untold millions of the people of the world. In their confusion they wonder who they are, what they are, why they're here, what they're doing, where they came from and where they're going.

Unbelievers have not inflicted this identity crisis upon themselves; they have inherited it as an unwelcome side effect of man's fallen nature. The church, however, is suffering from an identity crisis that is largely self-inflicted. Millions of twentieth-century Christians have allowed themselves to be robbed of one of the most precious and vital beliefs of historical Christian teaching, namely, that the church is the true Israel of God, and the only Israel through which God's eternal purpose is being consummated.

Believers by the millions have swallowed the idea that in the final years before the return of Christ God's dealings again will be centered in the physical nation of Israel, as they were in the Old Testament era. They have been taught that the promises made in the days of Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets were never fulfilled, and that their fulfillment will take place in our day.

Accordingly, they believe the Jewish people, rather than believers in Jesus, are God's chosen people, and they look for an instant replay of the Old Testament featuring, among other things, a rebuilt temple, renewed animal sacrifices, restoration of the physical throne of David, the elevation of Israel to a position of world supremacy, the rule of Christ as an earthly king (to compensate for what they see as his failure to obtain a political throne at his first advent), and a display of Jewish evangelism whose success will put to shame the church's efforts over nineteen centuries.

As the preceding chapters have shown, however, the nation of Israel long ago received the natural fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises, or saw the promises invalidated through disobedience and unbelief. And as subsequent chapters will show, the remaining fulfillments of the promises are spiritual, rather than natural, and are the inheritance of the church of Jesus Christ. The New Testament teaches that the church is the true heir to the Old Testament promises, that it alone fits the description of the chosen people referred to in the Old Testament, that it alone is God's special instrument for consummating his eternal purpose, and that in the sight of God there no longer is any difference between the Jewish nation and all the other nations of the world.

If you'll think back to some of the terms that were used in the first part of this book to describe the new Israel, you'll probably wonder how I can apply those terms to the church. Well, actually I didn't apply them to the church. The New Testament writers did. I just repeated what

they said.

Paul said that believers are:

- “The children of God” (Rom. 8:16).
- “The household of God” (Eph. 2:19).
- “The children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7).
- “Abraham’s seed” (Gal. 3:29).
- “The children of promise” (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 4:28).
- “A people of his own” (Ti. 2:14 — RSV).
- “The elect of God” (Col. 3:12).
- “Heirs of God” (Rom. 8:17).
- “Heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).
- “The temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16).
- “The circumcision” (Phil. 3:3).
- “The Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

Peter said that believers are:

- “A chosen generation” (1 Pet. 2:9).
- “A royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9).
- “An holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9).
- “A peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9).

James said that believers are:

- “Heirs of the kingdom” (Jas. 2:5).

John said that believers are:

- “The sons of God” (Jn. 1:12).
- “Kings and priests unto God” (Rev. 1:6).
- “The new Jerusalem” (Rev. 3:12).
- “The holy city” (Rev. 21:2).

The letter to the Hebrews said that believers are:

- “The people of God” (Heb. 4:9).
- “Mount Zion” (Heb. 12:22).
- “The city of the living God” (Heb. 12:22).
- “The heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22).

If the word of God says that believers in Christ are all of the things above, and we have never noticed that fact, or have never taken it seriously, perhaps we ought to give it some careful thought. Surely we agree that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). And if God so frequently inspired the early church leaders to describe believers in terms that the Old Testament reserved for the nation of Israel, perhaps he really was trying to tell us something.

Because God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), we may be sure he did not inspire the New Testament writers to describe the church in the above terms unless such terms, after Calvary, referred only to the church. Only one body of people (either the nation of Israel or the church, but not both) can be the children of promise, the children of Abraham, the elect of God, the circumcision, the heirs of the kingdom and the people of God. And it is the aim of this book to show that the two dozen New Testament phrases above, and others like them, do in fact refer

only to the church.

That list is pretty good evidence that believers in Christ now enjoy the special relationship with God that originally was promised to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament era. But those descriptive phrases are not the sole evidence to prove that point. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, the New Testament writers documented their case with an overwhelming display of proof.

So if you're questioning your identity after reading this chapter, please be patient for just a while. The scriptures will quickly help you to find yourself, and as a believer in Christ you'll soon discover your true identity as a member of spiritual Israel, and start to enjoy the immense benefits and blessings that go with citizenship in that great nation.

When believers recognize who they really are, the Bible begins to take on new meaning. Old Testament passages that were glossed over because "they're not for us" will suddenly speak to our hearts.

When we see that we have Abraham in our family tree, we'll take a tighter grip on the scriptures that have been passed down through our family.

When we see that we're the people who made the prophets' eyes light up, "that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister" (1 Pet. 1:12), we'll want to dig deeper into their writings to see what they said about us.

And a lot of New Testament passages that didn't seem particularly meaningful to us will suddenly catch our eye and force from our lips the believer's famous cry of mingled embarrassment and delight: "I never noticed that before!"

## **A Change of Heart**

A Pharisee who exceeded all other Pharisees in his zeal for the traditions of his fathers was, in the end, the man who argued most effectively that the church had forever replaced the nation of Israel in the purposes of God.

It was an irony born in heaven.

All the Jews knew Saul of Tarsus and his manner of life (Acts 26:4,5), and none would have doubted that he of all men would have fought to the death to defend Israel's claim to be God's chosen people.

Instead, as the apostle Paul, he said: "They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God" (Rom. 9:8).

Paul, prior to his conversion, was an aggressive defender of Israel's traditions. Zeal was his middle name. He had impressive religious credentials but mercy was not one of them.

He was "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Phil. 3:5,6). He said he was "a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city of Cilicia, yet brought up in this city (Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God" (Acts 22:3). "And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:14).

When Stephen was stoned, "Saul was consenting unto his death" (Acts 8:1). "He made havoc of the church" (Acts 8:3) and went about "breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1).

He later said, “I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (Acts 22:4). “And many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:10,11). “I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it” (Gal. 1:13).

It’s been said that when a man is converted, he turns 180 degrees and goes in a direction exactly opposite from the direction he’d been going before. Certainly that was true in the life of Paul. After his encounter with the living Christ his zeal was properly directed, his religious credentials were replaced by spiritual insights, he preached the faith which once he had destroyed (Gal. 1:23), and he received the astonishing revelation that believers in Christ are “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

The revelations given to Paul changed him from the persecutor to the persecuted, from the hunter to the hunted. His commitment to the resurrected Christ and the church which is his body, his abandonment of the hopeless nationalistic expectations of Old Testament Israel, his preaching of salvation by grace, not race, made him the target of countless zealous Jews of his own former persuasion. Outraged by his “betrayal” they followed him from town to town, stirred up the people against him, frequently had him imprisoned, whipped and beaten, and at least once had him stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19).

Harsh treatment did not still his voice, however. Again and again in his letters to the first century churches he said the unbelieving Jews were suffering from a severe case of mistaken identity. They were not God’s chosen people, he argued; only those of every race who were born from above now filled that role. And the church Paul loved embraced his teaching, and proclaimed it a vital part of the inspired message of the New Testament.

Today the truth and logic of Paul’s claims still stand as stepping stones to faith for those who view the church, now and forever, as God’s chosen people, and as stumblingstones that must somehow be explained away or ignored for those who instead believe, like the first-century Pharisees, that the scriptures still hold out the promise of a golden age of material blessing for the physical nation of Israel.

Let’s step back into that first century now and watch our former Pharisee shine the light of divine revelation into the darkness surrounding the misguided expectations of the Israel of old.

## **Unlocking a Mystery**

As any sports fan knows, you can’t tell the players without a program.

That was Saul’s trouble. In his confusion, he was rooting for the wrong team.

He didn’t realize there were two Israels—the old one and the new one—until, on the road to an away game at Damascus, the Lord gave him the program he was lacking.

Paul later said that the revelations God gave him about the church unlocked a mystery (Eph. 3:3) which had been hidden in God since the beginning of the world (Eph. 3:5,9), namely, that all of God’s people, whether Jews or Gentiles by natural descent, were to be members of the same body (Eph. 3:6).

To Paul it was revealed that it was God’s eternal plan to have—not a small nation of his own, but—a worldwide body of people of his own drawn from all “nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). This was the great and wonderful “mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4) that

Paul and the other New Testament writers came to understand and to preach so compellingly.

The early church leaders who received this revelation were astounded because suddenly they understood that this had always been God's intention. He had determined it before time began, before he "created all things by Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:9), and in the fulness of time it was "revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Eph. 3:5) and "made known to all nations for the obedience of faith" (Rom.

16:25,26).

What a dilemma that created for the Israel of old!

If this one worldwide body of believers was the "one body" (Eph. 2:16), if only Gentiles and Jews who believed in Christ were to be heirs of God's promise—"his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph. 3:6)—what place of special relationship did that leave for the nation of Israel?

Paul recognized, after all, the special covenant relationship into which God had originally called that nation. To them had been committed "the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2), and everyone else (with some exceptions, such as Gentiles adopted into the tribes of Israel) had been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

But now, Paul said, that was all over. God was now freely offering his "unsearchable riches" (Eph. 3:8) to people of all nations without requiring a change in their natural citizenship. Gentiles who had been aliens from the commonwealth of Israel were now, in Christ, no longer "foreigners, but fellowcitizens" (Eph. 2:19) in the new and spiritual Israel. Those who had been strangers from the covenants of promise were now, in Christ, "no more strangers" but members of "the household of God" (Eph. 2:19).

So the commonwealth of Israel, the family and household of God, now contained both Gentiles and Jews, Paul argued, but only those who believed in Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Those who were citizens of the Israel of old, but who had not received Christ, were simply unsaved members of one of the many nations of the world. Thus, he said, "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6), and those who were not he termed "Israel after the flesh" (1 Cor. 10:18).

By thus defining the place of the Israel of old in the purpose of God, Paul caused his enemies to increase geometrically. His former colleagues among the Pharisees, and many other unbelieving Jews, intensified their efforts to silence him. It was bad enough that such an eminent member of their group had received Jesus of Nazareth as the long-promised Messiah; it was even worse that he now went about saying that the body of Jews and Gentiles who believed in that Messiah had replaced the nation of Israel as God's chosen people.

Today there are still those—including many Christians—who press the claim that "Israel after the flesh" enjoys a special relationship with God above all other people. But the inspired Word of God, foreseeing that unfortunate tendency to exalt unbelievers at the expense of the believing body of Christ, has left us a wealth of proof denying such claims.

Paul's arguments supporting his claim that the church has forever replaced the Israel of old appear in virtually all of his New Testament epistles. It was not a subject he touched on briefly and then dropped. It was instead a major theme in his teaching for the church. Again and again he returned to it, not only to refute the claims of the first-century Pharisees but also to battle the Judaizers who constantly crept into the churches and attempted to steer believers back into the shadowy imperfection of Old Testament Judaism.

It was, of course, perfectly natural for the Pharisees to attack Paul and the other apostles so

violently. After all, the revelation God gave the early church made it clear that the nation of Israel had lost its monopoly on God; its patents and copyrights had expired. With their traditions and nationalistic expectations thus dismissed, it was inevitable that they would react ferociously.

It is less easy to understand, however, why believers in this present day would echo the claims of the first-century Pharisees. Paul's revelation hasn't changed. There have been no supplements to the inspired collection of New Testament books. The warning to those who would add doctrines still is the same: "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book" (Rev. 22:18).

Believers today have a serious responsibility to acquire a proper first-century, apostolic, New Testament understanding of the distinction between spiritual Israel and Israel after the flesh. Confusion in that vital area diverts our attention from what God is really doing, and wastes our time and energy in non-essential pursuits. If we are diligently watching the television news and reading newspapers and weekly news magazines to see what is happening to the nation of Israel, we're completely missing the point. The answers we seek won't be found there. The answers are in the inspired pages of the New Testament where we may read the exciting account of what God has eternally planned to do through the church.

### **What's the Difference?**

Once upon a time there was a great difference between the nation of Israel and the other nations of the world.

At Calvary, however, that distinction vanished as the universality of Christianity replaced the provincialism of Judaism.

Saul, as a proud citizen of Israel, had no doubts that his people still were something special among the nations in the sight of God. Paul, however, reached the opposite conclusion.

Like his countrymen, Saul boasted primarily of three things—the law, circumcision, and natural descent from Abraham. Like the other early church leaders, Paul demolished such claims.

Paul pointed out that the law of Moses came into existence long after God's covenant with Abraham (Gal. 3:17), that it was merely a temporary instrument (Gal. 3:19,24,25), and that it could not bring men into relationship with God because "the just shall live by faith, and the law is not of faith" (Gal. 3:11,12).

Likewise, regarding circumcision, he said that "in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6).

And finally, regarding nationality, his devastating words that we so rarely notice: "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly. . . .but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly" (Rom. 2:28,29). Paul did not remove these three props to Jewish pride to be malicious. He was making an important point, both for believers, so they could understand who they really were, and for the Jewish people (whom he loved), so they would not be deceived into a hopeless search for salvation through law, circumcision or ancestry.

The point is this: "There is no respect of persons with God" (Rom. 2:11).

Paul said God did not respect the claims of a certain group of human beings just because they had the law of Moses, and circumcision, and Abraham's family tree. There was only one thing that counted, he said, "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. 3:22,23).

I believe that most of us are inclined to apply that last passage of scripture to unsaved Gentiles. But if we read the third chapter of Romans we can readily see that Paul uses it in the context of both Gentiles and Jews. It is part of his major theme that since Calvary there has been no difference between the Jewish nation and the other nations.

He says the same thing again, seven chapters later: “There is *no difference* between the Jew and the Greek” (Rom. 10:12).

Paul, after his conversion, took a much higher view of the significance of law, circumcision and nationality. Where once he had had a fleshly and provincial understanding of their meaning, he now had a spiritual and universal understanding. He spiritualized their meanings because among “the abundance of revelations” God had given him (2 Cor. 12:7) was the vital truth that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

The law was no longer the law of works but now “the law of faith” (Rom. 3:27), and “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:2). “Love,” he said, “is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10).

What of circumcision? Paul clearly taught that God’s people were only those who had experienced an *inner work* of circumcision, “the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11).

He said that circumcision is not “outward in the flesh. . . *circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit*, and not in the letter,” the kind of circumcision that is not praised by men, but by God (Rom. 2:28,29).

For that reason, Paul said that *believers* “*are the circumcision*, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). Those who instead boasted of their circumcision in the flesh, who loved to see believers “entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1), he scornfully called “dogs,” and “evil workers” and “the concision” (Phil. 3:2).

As for nationality, Paul again and again returned to the theme that believers are the true Jews. “He is *not* a Jew, which is one *outwardly*,” he insisted, “but he *is* a Jew, which is one *inwardly*” (Rom. 2:28,29). Paul said that natural descent was nothing. Those people we know as Jews outwardly are not the Jews who are God’s chosen people. Only those who are Jews inwardly, only believers who are circumcised in heart and spirit, who “rejoice in Christ Jesus,” are the people of God, “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

Paul was not the first to plow this ground, however. John the Baptist earlier had cut some pretty deep furrows of his own. “When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Mt. 3:7-9).

John, like Paul, taught that only repentance and belief in the Messiah, in this present age, made men and women “children unto Abraham.” Through the new birth God raises up his people as “living stones” (1 Pet. 2:5) who are “the children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7).

And the Lord Jesus himself uttered some strong words on this same subject. To the Jews who said they were Abraham’s children (Jn. 8:39) and the children of God (Jn. 8:41), Jesus replied that if they truly were those children they would love Jesus (Jn. 8:42) and hear his word (Jn. 8:43). Because they instead sought to kill him (Jn. 8:40), he said they were not the children of God, or of Abraham, but “ye are of your father the devil” (Jn. 8:44). Those who are God’s

children hear God's words (Jn. 8:47).

In sum, the New Testament teaches that the law, and circumcision, and natural ancestry of which Israel boasted were but "a shadow of things to come" (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1) whereas Calvary brought into being the substance, the body of Christ.

The indisputable teaching of the New Testament is that there are only two kinds of people in the world today. There are the unsaved of all nations, Jewish or Gentile, who walk in darkness, ignorance and "the vanity of their mind" (Eph. 4:17,18), and the saved of all nations, Jewish or Gentile, who walk in the light. Among the unsaved of all nations "there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek" (Rom. 10:12), "no difference: for all have sinned" (Rom. 3:22,23). Likewise, among the saved of all nations, there is "no difference" between Gentiles and Jews (Acts 15:9), there "is neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11), and they are "one body by the cross" (Eph. 2:16). There is, now and forever, only "one fold, and one shepherd" (Jn. 10:16).

Any nationalistic distinction formerly held or claimed by the Israel of old vanished at Calvary. Paul taught that Israel had great initial advantages: "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4) but nevertheless failed to attain the goal. "Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; as it is written, Behold, I lay in Zion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (Rom. 9:32,33).

Paul said the condition laid down for Israel was the acceptance of the Messiah at his first advent. Those who stumbled at that stumblingstone forfeited their rights to be God's people. They remained dead in their sins, and dead people are not God's people. "He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living" (Mk. 12:27).

## **The Seed of Abraham**

Paul did not often call God's people fools.

But when their words and deeds perverted his teaching he said they acted like fools.

When they so quickly forgot that "a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16), Paul cried out in anguish, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you" (Gal. 3:1)?

When they so easily lapsed back into the bondage of "the weak and beggarly elements" (Gal. 4:9) of Old Testament Judaism, "the handwriting of ordinances that was against us," a mere "shadow of things to come" (Col. 2:14,17), he cried, "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3).

The folks in Galatia had a habit many of us share today. They believed almost anything they were told. And certain people had told them that while there might be one body of people in this New Testament age who became God's children by grace, through faith, namely, the church, there was also another body of people who held special status with God because they could trace their natural ancestry back to Abraham. Such people took pride in their fleshly, natural descent through carefully recorded generations of Israelites even though many of their ancestors were among the worst idolaters and sinners chronicled in the pages of the Old Testament.

But Paul, like Jesus, taught that "the flesh profiteth nothing" (Jn. 6:63).

Paul said that Abraham's standing with God came by grace, through faith. Abraham was saved by the same gospel that is preached today (Gal. 3:8). He "believed God, and it was accounted to

him for righteousness” (Gal. 3:6; Rom. 4:3).

And likewise, he said, Abraham’s children are *only* those people who are saved by the gospel. “They which are of faith, *the same are the children of Abraham*” (Gal. 3:7).

Therefore, believers alone are the descendants and offspring of Abraham. Natural descent is meaningless; to be a child of Abraham we must “walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham” (Rom. 4:12). Abraham and his God-fearing descendants in those years marked B.C. looked forward by faith to the coming of Christ; all of those who today would be God’s children must look back by faith to that same event.

It matters not from which nation we come, for God “preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall *all nations* be blessed” (Gal. 3:8). Those of every nation who avail themselves of the truth of the gospel become the children of Abraham, the children of God. There is no other way, “for ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26).

Didn’t circumcision prove a special relationship with God? Definitely not, said Paul. Abraham was saved by “the faith which he had *yet being uncircumcised*” (Rom. 4:11).

Couldn’t the works of the law make some people the children of God? Again, no, said Paul. The law merely was “added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the *promise* was made” (Gal. 3:19).

The promise? Now we’re getting back on familiar ground. We’re talking again about the promises made to Abraham, which is where our study began. In chapter 1 we listed four promises God made to Abraham. Paul is referring to them here.

“Now to Abraham *and his seed* were the promises made” (Gal. 3:16).

Who is the seed?

Paul said that God did not say “seeds, as of many; but as of one, *And to thy seed, which is Christ*” (Gal. 3:16).

Well, if Christ is *the* seed, does that also include those who believe in him?

Yes. “*If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise*” (Gal. 3:29).

Are you Christ’s? Have you been born again from above; have you committed your life to him? If you have, then you’re the seed of Abraham, “a Jew, which is one inwardly” (Rom. 2:29), and an heir, with your fellow believers, of all the Old Testament promises.

Later we will try to appraise the value of those promises for the church—if mere words can describe such a rich inheritance—but right now our first priority is to understand beyond any doubt that believers *are* in fact the only heirs.

Paul’s unequivocal statement in Galatians 3:29 that Christians are the seed and the heirs is one of the most important verses in the Bible. We dare not take it too lightly. To merely glance at it and hurry along would be the same as ignoring a will in which we have been named the sole heirs to a great fortune. If we forsake our true inheritance and settle for something less, as many believers have done, we make ourselves Esau who sell their birthright for a mess of pottage. It is essential that we grasp, in heart and mind and spirit, the vital fact that, of all the people in the world, believers alone are the heirs to the Old Testament promises. Accordingly, we should search the New Testament for further proof that the church is the seed of Abraham. Such proof is not hard to find.

For example, in the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul says: “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*. . . 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, (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations)” (Rom. 4:13-17).

We’ll come back later to Paul’s comment that God promised the whole world to Abraham and his seed. The point to be emphasized here is Paul’s insistence that the promises of God were not made to the one nation of Israel, through the law, but only to those of that nation and every nation who, through Christ and by the grace of God, attained the righteousness of faith. Paul was even more emphatic elsewhere in making this same point. Have you ever read carefully the ninth chapter of Romans, or the fourth chapter of Galatians? If not, and if you still feel that “Israel after the flesh” has a place in God’s purposes equal to, or perhaps above, that of the church—brace yourself!

Paul said he had “great heaviness and continual sorrow” in his heart (Rom. 9:2) because many of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh, had forfeited their inheritance. When the will was probated many of them were cut off as heirs because they had pursued the inheritance through improper means—“they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law” (Rom. 9:32). Of course, other kinsmen, who, like the 3,000 on the day of Pentecost, “gladly received” the Messiah (Acts 2:41), were not cut off but were heirs to the promises along with the later Gentile converts. They, and all Jews and Gentiles who since have received Christ as Lord and Saviour, became the new and spiritual Israel.

That is why Paul said, “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). They are not all spiritual Israel, which are citizens of natural Israel.

And “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*” (Rom. 9:7,8).

That last passage was italicized in hopes of making the point more emphatically—but even if it had been capitalized and printed in red it would still be ignored by some. And yet it is so simply stated by Paul that an objective reader cannot fail to understand it. The inspired word of God says the children of the flesh (the natural kinsmen of Paul, that Hebrew of the Hebrews) are not the children of God, just as the children of the flesh among the Gentile nations are not the children of God. Only the children of promise (the born-again believers in Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles by natural descent) are the children of God.

In Galatians 4:21-31 Paul hammered away at the same theme. He said Abraham’s two sons, the one by a bondwoman born after the flesh, the other by a freewoman born by promise, show in an allegory the difference between unbelieving “Israel after the flesh” and those of all nations who instead accept the claims of Christ. The former, he said, are the children of “Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children” while the latter represents the church, “Jerusalem which is above,” which is free and “is the mother of us all.”

Paul said that believers, “as Isaac was, are the children of promise” but that with respect to the unbelieving children of the flesh the scriptures said, “*Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman*” (Gal. 4:30). In other words (I didn’t say it; Paul did) as far as God’s eternal purpose is concerned, cast out, remove from consideration, the physical, political nation of Israel, and her unsaved citizens, for the inheritance belongs to spiritual Israel and not to natural Israel.

Now and forever it is only of believers that it can be said: “As many as are led by the Spirit of God, *they* are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). And “the Spirit itself beareth witness with our

Spirit, that *we* are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16,17).

## A Tale of Two Trees

References to trees are common in the scriptures. At both the beginning and the end of the Bible, for example, we read of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; Rev. 22:2). David said a righteous man is “like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season” (Ps. 1:3). And the Lord Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed that grew into a great tree (Lk. 13:19).

But the trees we want to talk about here are a fig tree and an olive tree, New Testament symbols, respectively, of the Israel of old and the new and spiritual Israel.

Throughout his long and patient dealings with the old Israel, God constantly hungered for his people to bring forth fruit. The harvest, however, was small. Later, the gospel writers spoke of the physical hunger of Jesus of Nazareth as symbolic of God’s hunger for fruit from his people.

“Now in the morning as he returned into the city, he hungered. And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away” (Mt. 21:18,19).

Luke recounts the same story as a parable of the Lord, and it is obvious beyond argument that it relates to the earthly ministry of Christ and the approaching end of the Jewish nation (which, of course, occurred in A.D. 70 when the Romans under Titus destroyed Jerusalem and captured and dispersed the Jews).

“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, *these three years* I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down” (Lk. 13:6-9).

Instead of bearing fruit, however, the nation of Israel during that final year exceeded all of its prior transgressions by crucifying the Messiah after his ministry of approximately three and a half years. There could thereafter be no possible fate for the fig tree except to wither away (Mt. 21:19), to be “dried up from the roots” (Mk. 11:20), and to be cut down (Lk. 13:9). Thus, as John the Baptist had prophesied, “now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Mt. 3:10).

In God’s sight the tree of Old Testament Judaism is dead and can never bring forth fruit “*henceforward for ever*” (Mt. 21:19). Its leafy but fruitless forms and rituals are rejected forever. But there is another tree, one that is truly “the planting of the Lord” (Is. 61:3), and that is the olive tree that symbolizes the new and spiritual Israel.

Paul taught that the good olive tree had as its root the faithful remnant of the nation of Israel, those who like Abraham attained to the righteousness of God by grace, through faith. Throughout the years of idolatry and sin, God had preserved that remnant until, in the fullness of time, the Messiah could be brought forth from it.

Paul said Isaiah had prophesied of that remnant when he said that, “though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved” (Born. 9:27), and, “except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we had been as Sodom, and been made like unto Gomorrah” (Born. 9:29). Likewise, he said, in the days of Elijah, when the prophet mourned that

he was the last man to seek the ways of the Lord, “what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baa!” (Rom. 11:3,4).

Paul therefore concluded that “even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Rom. 11:5). And although the nation as a whole was doomed to go the way of the withered fig tree, nevertheless the remnant would thrive as the good olive tree. Thus, he said, “Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it” (Rom. 11:7).

Into this good olive tree, Paul said, the Lord grafted Gentile branches which would partake “of the root and fatness of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17), that is, of all the promises made to Abraham and his seed. The Jews who did not accept Christ as their Messiah were branches that were broken off because of unbelief (Rom. 11:19,20) but individual Jews in every generation, “if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again” (Rom. 11:23).

It is appropriate that believers today should share Paul’s “great heaviness and continual sorrow” (Rom. 9:2) over the multitudes of Jewish branches broken off through unbelief in their Messiah. It is appropriate to pray and work toward their conversion so they may be grafted into the olive tree of spiritual Israel. It is inappropriate, however, to try to force upon the New Testament the claim that at some future date all living Jews will be converted.

Paul in Romans 11:25 returns to the “mystery” he discusses elsewhere, namely, “that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body. and partakers of (God’s) promise in Christ by the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). In the letter to the Romans he said that the mystery required, in order for a worldwide body of believers to spring forth, “that blindness (or hardening—RSV) in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in” (Rom. 11:25).

The scriptures seem to indicate that when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, there will be no further conversions; that time, and “the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2), will then have ended, and the Lord will have returned to the earth. (The author believes that when Christ suddenly returns to earth, time will end and the eternity of the new heavens and new earth will be ushered in. At Christ’s return all the dead will be resurrected, and they and the living will be judged worthy either of an eternity in the presence of the Lord or an eternity of punishment.) Perhaps there will be a sharply higher rate of conversions among the Jewish people before that great day but, in fairness, it must be said that chapters 9-11 of the book of Romans indicate otherwise.

For example, Paul has told us there is “no difference between the Jew and the Greek...for whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:12,13). Therefore, Jews who are to be saved must find that salvation in the same way, in this same age, as Gentiles. And that way is only through repentance and belief in Christ.

Second, Paul does not say that the faithful remnant of Jews ever will become more than just a remnant. On the contrary, he teaches that there will be a sudden termination to further conversions (at the second advent). After referring to the remnant that shall be saved (Rom. 9:27), he warns that God “will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness: because a short work will the Lord make upon the earth” (Rom. 9:28).

Third, in referring to that part of the nation of Israel which is blinded and broken off by unbelief, Paul quotes David’s prophetic words from Psalm 69:22,23: “Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them; Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back *alway*” (Rorn. 11:9,10). Strong’s Greek

Dictionary of the New Testament says the Greek word *diapantos*, translated “always” in the above passage, means through all time.

Paul saw that “through all time” many of his kinsmen would reject their Messiah. He would have given anything to have had it otherwise, even to the point of saying that “I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren” (Rom. 9:3), but he knew it was not to be. Therefore he fervently asked the Gentile converts to whom he preached to share in turn the gospel with the Jewish people in this present age, so that his ministry at least “might save *some* of them” (Rom. 11:14).

The blind and unbelieving part of Israel Paul refers to in Romans 11:25 is the same group he refers to in Romans 9:8, “the children of the flesh” who “are *not* the children of God.” They are *not* the seed of Abraham because “the children of promise are counted for the seed” (Rom. 9:8), and only believers “are the children of promise” (Gal. 4:28).

Paul said there is *only one way* in which “all Israel” (Rom. 11:26) can be saved. He pointed out that Isaiah saw that way nearly 800 years before it came to pass. when he prophesied that “the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord” (Is. 59:20).

Here, as in his other letters, Paul teaches that repentance and belief in that Redeemer who came more than 1,900 years ago is the only way of salvation. Now. In this age. If we have trouble reading Romans 11:26 in that context, it is only because of the second word in the first part of the verse: “And *so* all Israel shall be saved,” and Strong’s Greek Dictionary of the New Testament can easily lift us over that hurdle. Strong’s says the Greek word *houtos* that is translated “so” means “*in this way [referring to what precedes or follows]*”. In this case, it obviously refers to what follows, and therefore the meaning of the verse is this: “And in the way that follows all Israel shall be saved; by the Deliverer who was prophesied to come, and who came.”

A closing comment about the dead fig tree of Old Testament Judaism is also in order. There are today some who teach that the Jewish nation is destined to evangelize the world on behalf of the Messiah, even though up until now they have largely rejected him. A fair and objective reading of the scriptures would seem to deny that possibility. The dead fig tree cannot bring forth the fruit of massive conversions because Christ himself said, “Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward *for ever*” (Mt. 21:19). It is only the olive tree, spiritual Israel, that can “bring forth fruit unto God” (Rom. 7:4).

“Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries” (Jas. 3:12)?

## **Why Argue with Paul?**

In the preceding six chapters we have quoted perhaps 100 New Testament verses in demonstrating that the church is the new and spiritual Israel which has replaced the old, natural Israel.

There are many people, however, even many believers, who embrace instead the belief that God today does not have only one chosen body of people, which is the church, but that he has two bodies—the church which is his “heavenly people” and the nation of Israel which is his “earthly people.”

It should be clear to any objective reader of the prior six chapters, however, that the New Testament writers, and particularly Paul, went to great lengths to disprove such claims. For that

reason, it is easy to produce 100 New Testament verses to prove that, now and forever, only believers in Christ are God's special people. On the other hand, it is impossible for those holding contrary opinions to produce even one New Testament verse, which, taken in its proper context, supports their claim. For that reason, they rely almost exclusively on Old Testament passages.

In their efforts to find New Testament evidence to prove the existence or emergence of a body of "redeemed" people separate from the church, they typically point to Romans 11:26—"And so all Israel shall be saved." As we have already shown, however, that verse, in harmony with all of Paul's teaching, means that all Jewish people (like all Gentiles) can only be saved "in the way that follows," that is, through the Redeemer whose saving advent occurred more than 1,900 years ago. And that salvation is offered only in this age, before Christ returns to earth to gather to himself those who are his. The phrase "all Israel" does not mean every Jewish person will be saved in an imagined future age, just as the statements that John the Baptist was sent as a witness "that *all men* through him might believe" (Jn. 1:7) and that Christ came "that *the world* through him might be saved" (Jn. 3:17) never meant that everyone in the world would be saved.

To those who would nevertheless brave 100 to 1 odds, or even 100 to 3 or 100 to 5 odds, assuming a few more New Testament scriptures can be twisted to support their position, the question then becomes: Why do believers want to tackle such fearsome odds when it puts them in clear opposition to the teachings of the great theologian Paul and the other New Testament writers?

If we devote ourselves to trying to prove that the natural Jew still maintains a special relationship with God, that his fleshly credentials of law, circumcision and ancestry still are valid in God's sight, what do we accomplish? If we but stop and think for a moment we will realize that we do great harm both to the church *and to the Jewish people* through such misguided activity.

In making such claims we merely endorse the Pharisees' hopeless nationalistic expectations, their first-century dreams of a future golden age when Jerusalem would be the center of the earth and Israel would rule all nations. In fact, however, the golden age the prophets foretold arrived at the first advent of our Lord, when, as we shall see, his redeemed community received a very substantial down-payment on its royal inheritance.

The New Testament teaches that, next to Christ himself, the church is the thing nearest and dearest to the heart of God. It is "his workmanship" (Eph. 2:10), his creative masterpiece, and the instrument through which he is accomplishing "the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11).

God's word calls the church "his body, the *fullness* of him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23), and because it *is* "the fullness of him" there is no room left for another people to occupy a special place in God's purpose. Even if there were, no well-informed person would be foolish enough to compare that "glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing... holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27) with the physical, political nation of Israel or with any of the other spotted, wrinkled and blemished twentieth-century nations.

The Old Testament says Israel was the wife of God (Jer. 3:14, 31:32) but the New Testament, knowing that spiritual Israel has forever replaced natural Israel, says the church is the bride of Christ (Rom. 7:4; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7). Since believers agree that God and Christ "are one" (Jn. 17:22), then surely we will also agree that our one God, who ordains only one wife for man, the two to be as one flesh (Eph. 5:31), would not violate his own principle by himself having two wives.

But great harm also is done to the Jewish people by those who continue to encourage them in the belief that their natural descent from Abraham somehow guarantees their eventual salvation. Paul's "great heaviness and continual sorrow" (Rom. 9:2) were occasioned by his kinsmen's mistaken reliance on law, circumcision and natural descent as their passport to special relationship with God.

Paul loved his people and he urgently wanted them to see the truth that their justification before God came freely, but *only*, by "grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

It is cruel and unfair to encourage Jewish people in futile expectations based on race or natural descent, to even suggest to them the idea that at some future date "all Israel" will be saved. Those who teach that the hope of Israel is the prosperity and power of a future political kingdom create dangerous obstacles to the Jewish people's understanding that *the Gospel is their only hope*, as it is the only hope of the Gentile. There is no difference between them. And "*now is the accepted time . . . now is the day of salvation*" (2 Cor. 6:2).

## **A Divine Principle**

As we begin to acquire a proper apostolic understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church, as we recognize that the church has eternally succeeded to the position of God's chosen people, we must be careful not to over-react and dismiss the concept of Old Testament Israel as totally meaningless and irrelevant.

Israel was a type of the church, and as such its personalities, institutions and experiences are for the church "examples" (1 Cor. 10:6,11), "figures" (Heb. 9:9,24), "patterns" (Heb. 8:5, 9:23) and "shadows" (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5, 10:1) of the new and better things that were unveiled at Calvary. The great lessons enshrined in the Old Testament are for the admonition (1 Cor. 10:11) and instruction (2 Tim. 3:16) of the church.

The basic Old Testament types are not really difficult to understand. For instance, when God's judgment fell on Egypt (a type of the world) the applied blood of the Passover lamb (a type of Christ) protected the nation of Israel (a type of the church). The people passed through the Red Sea (a type of water baptism), were guided by the pillar of cloud and of fire (a type of the Holy Spirit's guidance) and were fed by manna from heaven (a type of God's provision). Between Egypt (the world) and Canaan (a type of heavenly living, both now and eternally) lay the wilderness (a type of the testings and trials of our faith). The sin, idolatry, murmurings and other failures of the Israelites "happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

The scriptures teach us that in all of God's dealings with mankind, from the time of Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), we may discern the same divine principle at work, namely, "first the natural, then the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). God has progressively revealed his purpose through, first, his dealings with the *natural* Israel and, second and finally, his dealings with *spiritual* Israel. (There is no scriptural basis for the regressive idea that God's dealings will again be centered exclusively on natural Israel at some future date.)

Because God's dealings follow the sequence of first the natural, then the spiritual, it is easy to see and understand that the same progression applied to his people and his promises. The natural people of Old Testament Israel enjoyed the natural fulfillment of the promises made to them, or saw the promises invalidated through sin and unbelief; there are no remaining natural

fulfillments. The spiritual people of New Testament Israel, the believers in Christ, have received, are receiving and will receive all spiritual fulfillments of the promises.

In succeeding chapters we will appraise the inheritance the church came into as heir to the promises made in the days of Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets. First, however, it appears desirable to show how the divinely inspired writers of the New Testament used the natural types of Old Testament events, institutions and personages in their teaching for the church. Many examples compete for our attention but Galatians 4:21-31 will suffice.

In that passage, as in many other New Testament passages, Paul skillfully defeated his adversaries with their own ammunition. He took the “foolish Galatians” who desired “to be under the law” (Gal. 4:21) right into the thick of the Old Testament law, into Genesis, the first book of Moses, to prove a spiritual truth with natural types. The early church recognized the need for spiritual authority to support their doctrines (for them, of course, the scriptures were the writings we today call the Old Testament) and therefore, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they quoted freely from the Old Testament.

In the fourth chapter of Galatians, as elsewhere, Paul proved his point through the superior understanding God gave him of the true meaning of the Old Testament scriptures. He said that the story of the two sons of Abraham was more than just a prominent part of the history of the Jewish people.

It was, he said, an allegory (Gal. 4:24), that is, a story in which the people and events were symbols or types standing for some greater truth.

The allegory speaks of two women and their two sons who were fathered by Abraham. Hagar, the bondswoman and the mother of Ishmael who was “born after the flesh” (Gal. 4:23), typifies natural Jerusalem. Sarah, the freewoman and the mother of Isaac, the child of promise (Gal. 4:23,28), typifies the church which is spiritual Jerusalem. The children of natural Jerusalem are in bondage (Gal. 4:25), as are all who are unsaved, but the children of the church, the heavenly Jerusalem, are free (Gal. 4:26). Those who are in bondage, who are not born again but are only “born after the flesh” (Gal. 4:29), cannot possibly be God’s people. Therefore, the scriptures “cast out” (Gal. 4:30) the natural Jerusalem and her children after the flesh, and identify the heirs as the believers in Christ who are the children of promise (Gal. 4:30).

Paul told the Galatians that if they understood that allegory they would “hear the law” (Gal. 4:21). If not, they had a spiritual hearing problem.

In Paul’s day, as in our own, there was an indispensable need for spiritual ears to “*hear* what the *Spirit* saith unto the churches” (Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). Paul said that one of the reasons believers have been given the Spirit of God is “that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (1 Cor. 2:12). Because the things of God are spiritual things which must be spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14), they are foolishness to the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14) and, unfortunately, are not readily discernible by babes in Christ who yet require a spiritual diet of milk rather than meat (1 Cor. 3:1,2).

Paul was constantly in trouble with the Jews because his spiritual interpretations of the Old Testament scriptures warred with their natural interpretation. Our onetime Pharisee had come to see clearly that “the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18) but his former colleagues just could not believe that their highly vaunted institutions were “ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13).

When they futilely insisted that they were God’s chosen people, Paul proved by the Old Testament scriptures that the spiritual descendants of Abraham, not the natural descendants, were

God's chosen people.

When they looked for a future age of material blessing and power for their nation, Paul argued instead that believers, as God's chosen people, *already* were blessed "with all spiritual blessings" (Eph. 1:3) and that God's power *already* "worketh in us" (Eph. 3:20).

One section of the New Testament, the book of Hebrews, is constructed almost entirely on types. It is an inspired work of great depth and perception, and it gives us a striking picture of the weakness and imperfection of the natural types of the Old Testament when compared with their spiritual fulfillments in the New Testament. Just as the law was temporary until the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:19,24,25) so *all* the natural types were merely temporary until the unveiling of the eternal, and far better, spiritual realities. As we shall see later, Hebrews is the book of the better things that are ours because of Calvary.

Because the Lord Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2), spiritual Israel hears a better voice than the voices heard by natural Israel (Heb. 1:1,2) and we have, among other things, a better Priest (Heb. 4:15), a better priesthood (Heb. 5:6), a better hope (Heb. 7:19), a better covenant (Heb. 8:10), a better Tabernacle (Heb. 9:11), a better altar (Heb. 13:10), a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:14), a better country (Heb. 11:16), and a better city (Heb. 12:22).

These and other spiritual fulfillments of the New Testament era have forever replaced the natural types of the former dispensation. Like Paul, we should be "afraid of" anyone who teaches that God's program calls for a future return to the bondage of those weak and beggarly elements of Old Testament Judaism (Gal. 4:9-11).

## **The Church in Prophecy**

Historically it has always been believed that the church was prophesied in the Old Testament.

In the nineteenth century, however, Christian doctrine was invaded by the alien idea that the church was not prophesied in the Old Testament, and that key prophetic passages there all refer to natural Israel.

That revision in historical Christian teaching is part of the shaky foundation beneath the theories of those who teach that the Old Testament promises are to be fulfilled through the physical, political nation called Israel and not through the church.

It was about 150 years ago that this regrettable departure from historical Christian doctrine began to take hold. At that time there were many Christians who had been raised on the belief that the world would become progressively better, and that as it neared perfection, Christ would return to set up his kingdom. In the early 1800s, however, it occurred to a number of those believers that the world was getting not better, but worse. (You may have noticed that yourself.)

Presumably those well-meaning people were discouraged because the best efforts of generations of believers, including their own, had failed to evangelize the world after 18 centuries of trying. Therefore, they reached the startlingly erroneous conclusion that the job of world evangelization was not to be accomplished by the church—but by the nation of Israel. At that point the search for proof texts was on, and in time that search became a feverish and reckless competition to exalt the natural types of the Old Testament above the spiritual realities of the New Testament.

In those wild days of doctrinal dislocation the new school of thought made many incredible claims, and in time those claims were integrated into an elaborate system of Bible interpretation known as dispensationalism. By 1909 a man named C. I. Scofield had concluded that all of the

existing editions of the Bible “left much to be desired” and that what was necessary “to facilitate the study and intelligent use of the Bible” was a massive infusion of footnotes explaining the newly discovered intricacies of dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism, as perpetuated by the Scofield Reference Edition, teaches that Christ came to be a political ruler like David; that God the Father expected him to reign as a social reformer who would enforce the law of Moses from an Israel that would be the supreme world power; that the Jews by rejecting the Lord Jesus forced God to change his plans and allow his Son to be crucified, and that at his second advent Christ will finally succeed in accomplishing his Father’s will by reigning for a thousand years in a restored Davidic kingdom.

Dispensationalism teaches that the church is merely a temporary instrument which will be removed from the earth so that God can resume his dealings with the Jews who are his “chosen people.” With the church conveniently out of the way, the dispensationalist then applies all of the Old Testament prophecies to twentieth-century Israel, in opposition to historical Christian teaching which says that since Calvary the church is the only heir to the promises.

The events predicted by this radical nineteenth-century doctrine (the Secret Rapture, the Great Tribulation, the Millennium, etc.) are too complicated to be discussed here but the interested reader will find much information about them in the author’s book, *Up, Up and Away* (Reiner Publications, Swengel, Pa.). There, the author charges that dispensationalism belittles Christ’s accomplishments at his first advent, that it characterizes the church as a failure, and that it fosters spiritual immaturity in individual believers.

Dispensationalists are strangely unable to envision the worldwide church of Jesus Christ making much of an impact on the world in this present age, even though it is empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. But with the church and the Holy Spirit taken out of the way, they have no trouble at all envisioning the little nation of Israel, empowered only by a belated mental belief in the Messiah, performing such mighty exploits of evangelism that in just a few years its “evangelists” have the greatest number of converts in all of history.

A major target of the nineteenth-century doctrinal attack on historical Christian teaching was the long-cherished belief that the church, as the body of Christ, was the fulfillment of much Old Testament prophecy. In denying that foundational belief, the new school of thought argued that the early church fathers, the Protestant Reformers and the great Bible expositors and commentators of prior centuries had not been adequately enlightened by God, and therefore had been in error when they taught that the church was thus prophesied.

In keeping with historical Christian teaching, this book has already presented a wealth of scriptural evidence to prove that the church was indeed prophesied in the Old Testament. In Part 2 we have shown the insistent and compelling way in which the New Testament writers demonstrated that the church has eternally replaced the nation of Israel as God’s chosen people, and in the preceding chapter we have shown that the existence and experiences of the Israel of old were for the admonition and instruction of the church.

Clearly, everything in the Old Testament was merely preliminary to the coming of Christ and his redeemed community of believers. The church, as the fulfillment of much Old Testament prophecy, is the culmination of the progressive revelation of God as epitomized by the principle, “first the natural, then the spiritual.”

In Part 3 of this book, as we appraise the richness of the promises to which the church is heir, it will become increasingly apparent that the church not only is prophesied in the Old Testament but also that it is second in prominence only to the Lord Jesus Christ himself as the subject of all

prophecy.

Simple logic dictates that this must be so. The scriptures say that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10) and that Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets (Mt. 5:17). They also say that Jesus is “the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18) and that therefore he and the body are one (Eph. 5:30-32). That being the case, the Old Testament could not have referred so frequently to Christ without also referring to the church. If the testimony of the Head is the spirit of prophecy, then the testimony of the body must also be the spirit of prophecy. If the Head fulfills the law and the prophets, then the body must also fulfill the law and the prophets.

Time and again the New Testament confirms that the prophets foretold the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. At the very beginning, when the aged Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms he quoted Isaiah 52:10, 42:6 and 49:6 in proclaiming to the Lord that “mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of *all people*; a light to lighten *the Gentiles*, and the glory of *thy people Israel*” (Lk. 2:30-32).

Christ himself told his followers that the Old Testament had foretold that universal church. He said it was *written in the prophets* that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name *among all nations*” (Lk. 24:46,47).

Other New Testament scriptures say the same thing. The establishment of the church composed of believing Jews and Gentiles was prophesied in Amos 9:11,12, according to Acts 15:13-17; foretold in Hosea 1:10 and 2:23, according to Romans 9:23-26 and 1 Peter 2:10, and attested by the prophets and Moses, according to Acts 26:22,23.

Because Christ himself told us that the dead fig tree of Old Testament Judaism would bear no more fruit “henceforward for ever” (Mt. 21:19), and because only believers can “bring forth fruit unto God” (Rom. 7:4), we may be certain that Isaiah spoke of the church, spiritual Israel, when he prophesied that “Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit” (Is. 27:6).

Because we know that only the church was ever entrusted with the Great Commission, we may be certain that Isaiah spoke only of the church when he said: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion. Thy God reigneth” (Is. 52:7).

Because Christ said “the name of the city of my God...is new Jerusalem” (Rev. 3:12), and because Hebrews 12:22 says the church is “mount Zion” and “the city of the living God” we may be certain that the prophet referred to the church when he spoke of “The city of the Lord, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 60:14).

Peter identified for us the age which the prophets described. He did not say that they spoke of some future period of time when the political nation of Israel would inherit the Old Testament promises. Rather, he said the prophets spoke “*of these days*” (Acts 3:24), the days that began at Calvary and Pentecost and that continue until time ends when Christ returns for his church. In the final part of this book we will study the remarkable ways in which the church is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. We will see beyond all doubt that the two subjects of prophecy that made the prophets wax eloquent, that fired their words with zest and excitement, that thrilled their own souls and those of their hearers, were, first, the Redeemer and King and, second, the people who were to reign with him, starting at his first advent and continuing eternally.

## **Abraham Revisited**

With the gracious light of the New Testament now illuminating our way, let us set out once again with Abraham on his journey of faith.

We perceive him differently in this new light. No longer do we see just a hopeful traveler from Mesopotamia on his way toward the founding of a small nation in the middle east. We see instead the one who is destined to be “the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16) on his way toward the founding of the worldwide church of Jesus Christ.

We know now that his every step is part of God’s plan to choose for himself a community of redeemed people, not just a few million from one little nation, but “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9).

At the time that “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Gal. 3:6), was he a circumcised Jew under the Old Testament law? No, none of these. Circumcision came later, “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). The term Jew also came later, a derivative of the name of his great-grandson Judah. The law came 430 years later (Gal. 3:17).

What was he then?

He was a man created as all men are, in the image of Adam, “of the earth, earthy” (1 Cor. 15:47), but a man who saw that we also are intended to have another image, “the image of the heavenly” (1 Cor. 15:49).

He was a man saved by grace, through faith (Rom. 4:16). He was a man who heard and gladly received the gospel; a man who saw the first advent of Christ as the wellspring of his salvation.

Did you think Abraham entered into his special relationship with God in a unique and ancient way that somehow differs from the only way that is open for men and women in the twentieth century? Well, he didn’t, “for there is no respect of persons with God” (Rom. 2:11). Galatians 3:8 says the gospel was preached to him.

Did you think Abraham couldn’t look ahead to the coming of Christ in the same way that believers today look back to his coming? Well, he could, because Jesus himself said that “Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad” (Jn. 8:56).

The keynotes of character of this man of God were his faith, hope and obedience. “By *faith*... he went out, not knowing whither he went” (Heb. 11:8). And, while he waited for Isaac, the child of promise, “against *hope* (he) believed in *hope*, that he might become the father of many nations” (Rom. 4:18). And because he would not have spared his own son, but in all things *obeyed* the voice of the Lord (Gen. 22:18), God confirmed the promises to him and his seed.

His unquenchable belief in God, the source of his faith, hope and obedience, made him the father of those of all nations who today are believers in Jesus Christ. Only through repentance and belief in Christ in this present age do men and women become “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

To the extent that we follow in Abraham’s footsteps, to the extent that we believe as he believed and lead lives of faith, hope and obedience, we are made heirs, now and eternally, of all the promises. ~According to your faith be it unto you” (Mt. 9:29).

Let’s begin now to appraise the value of those promises, those “spiritual blessings in heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3), that belong to believers as the “children of promise” (Gal. 4:28).

And let’s see if you don’t agree by the time we’re finished that Christians are the richest people in the world.

## A Greater Nation

The first promise to Abraham (see chapter 2) was the promise to make his descendants into a great nation.

Like the promises subsequently made to the whole nation, this promise to the one man Abraham was conditional. The conditions for fulfillment of the promise were Abraham's faith and obedience. God required that he leave the country in which he lived, and go into a strange land without knowing what lay ahead of him.

The book of Hebrews says that if Abraham and Sarah "had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned" (Heb. 11:15). But if Abraham had returned to his old country, or if he had been like the Israelites during the Exodus who "*in their hearts* turned back again into Egypt" (Acts 7:39), he would have violated God's covenant, and the Lord would have been under no obligation to fulfill the promises.

But Abraham was no longer mindful of his former country, and he "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief" but was "fully persuaded that what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (Rom. 4:20,21). "Therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness," not "for his sake alone...but for us also... if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom. 4:22-25).

Because Abraham met God's conditions, the Old Testament Israelites received the natural fulfillment of the promise to make them into a great nation. Scriptural evidence of that fulfillment was presented in chapter 2 and need not be repeated here. There must, however, be a remaining fulfillment of that promise since the superior revelation of the New Testament shows us that believers of every generation are the heirs of the promises. And indeed there is a further fulfillment—the great spiritual nation that is the church of Jesus Christ.

Initially *God chose one nation out of all the people in the world*. Since Calvary, however, *he has chosen one people out of all the nations in the world*. "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" (Gal. 3:8).

Peter was quite astonished when he discovered, just before the conversion of the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his kinsmen and friends, that God's plans were not limited to the little nation of Israel. "Of a truth," said Peter, "I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34,35).

Since Calvary, God's chosen nation has had no national boundaries. It is the new and spiritual Israel in which there are no distinctions of race or nationality. It is "the Israel of God" where "neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (Gal. 6:15,16). It is the "holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9) that is "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:23).

The Lord Jesus spoke of this great nation more than 1,900 years ago. In a parable reminiscent of Isaiah 5:1-7, he told the chief priests and elders of the Jews about a vineyard planted by a certain householder and let out to husbandmen, or tenants (RSV). Unfortunately, however, instead of producing fruit for the owner, the tenant farmers killed the servants that the owner sent for the fruit, and finally killed the son of the owner when he was sent, thinking that thereby they might "seize on his inheritance" (Mt. 21:33-39).

Jesus asked the Jewish leaders what the owner of the vineyard would do to those tenants (Mt. 21:40), and they said, “He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons” (Mt. 21:41). At that point the Lord Jesus made it clear to them that they themselves were the wicked tenants, and they understood it was their own destruction they were foretelling. (The nation of Israel was, of course, miserably destroyed by the Romans later in the first century.) Christ told the Jews that the kingdom of God would be taken from them, “and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Mt. 21:43).

That nation is, of course, spiritual Israel, the believers in every nation who “bring forth fruit unto God” (Rom. 7:4; Jn. 15:16). The church alone is the holy nation through which God is accomplishing his eternal purpose. He has not chosen any other but “he hath chosen *us* in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). He has not adopted any other but he has “predestinated *us* unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself” (Eph. 1:5). He has not accepted any other but “he hath made *us* accepted in the beloved” (Eph. 1:6). The inheritance is not promised to any other but “the riches of his grace” have “abounded toward *us*” (Eph. 1:7,8). He has not revealed his will to any other but he has “made known unto *us* the mystery of his will” (Eph. 1:9). And that will is not to consummate his purpose through two different bodies of people but to “gather together in *one* all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (Eph. 1:10).

## **A Greater Multitude**

The second promise to Abraham (see chapter 3) was that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth, or the sand of the seashore, or the stars of the sky.

We have already seen that because Abraham met God’s conditions of obedience and faith those promises had a natural fulfillment for Old Testament Israel.

Since Calvary, however, their fulfillment has applied to the church. Over the past 19 centuries, the believers in Christ who are the true descendants of Abraham have grown to a combined total that no man can count. In this present generation alone it is impossible for anyone to say how many millions of born-again believers there are in all the nations of the world. Only God knows their present number, or their combined number over 19 centuries, just as only he knows the number of stars in the heavens.

John refers to believers as “a great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). The writer of the book of Hebrews refers to believers as “a great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1).

It is irrelevant whether the number of true believers alive today is one per cent of the world’s population of four billion (making their number 40 million), or two per cent (80 million), or some other number. Census-taking is unnecessary. But whatever the number, the remnant of grace in this age is far greater than, for example, the remnant in Elijah’s day. At that time, according to 1 Kings 19:18 and Romans 11:4, the number of the faithful was down to 7,000.

In fact, it can be shown that the remnant was down to *one* in that hour when the Son of God was crucified. Shortly before his death Christ told his followers that, in fulfillment of Zechariah 13:7, “all ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered” (Mk. 14:27); “ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone” (Jn. 16:32).

But from that remnant of one has come a worldwide body of countless millions of believers. A single mustard seed, though small when it is planted in the ground, grows up to be a tree that is “greater than all herbs” (Mk. 4:31,32). In the same way, Jesus, as a single seed buried in the garden, sprang forth into new life, and his kingdom since then has grown ever larger.

As the mustard tree is “greater than all herbs,” so believers have a special greatness that transcends mere numbers. They are clothed in God’s righteousness, and in them, and through them, Christ lives his victorious life. They are “greater than all herbs,” more than conquerors, because “greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4).

Whatever the size of spiritual Israel today, or whatever its combined size over all the centuries between the first and second coming of Christ, we may rest in the knowledge that God, who is “bringing *many* sons unto glory” (Heb. 2:10), knows exactly what the number is to be.

## **A Greater Land**

The third promise to Abraham is one that makes the hearts of many flutter wildly. While it can create varying degrees of speculative interest among unbelievers, it frequently comes close to causing cardiac arrest for many believers.

In God’s promise that he would give to Abraham and his seed the land of Canaan, those who have trouble receiving “the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14) finally feel that they have good, solid ground under their feet.

They might not know what to make of all those New Testament passages that show there is no longer any difference between Jews and Gentiles in God’s sight. They might be perplexed by the overwhelming weight of New Testament proof that believers in Christ are the true descendants of Abraham. They might be baffled by the New Testament contention that the church has forever succeeded the nation of Israel as God’s chosen people.

But when they read that God said to Abraham, “Unto thy seed will I give this land” (Gen. 12:7), they perceive with a great sigh of relief a solid, down-to-earth promise on which they can really plant their feet.

As we have shown, however, the Old Testament land of Canaan was merely a type, a figure of a greater land of promise that lay ahead. The land of Canaan was but a shadow of the heavenlies or heavenly places (Eph. 1:3), that spiritual land that we know in part today, and shall know in full through eternity. In that land, if we believe the New Testament, we are *already* seated with Christ (Eph. 2:6) “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named” (Eph. 1:21).

In chapter 4 we showed that, because of Abraham’s obedience and faith, the Israelites received the natural fulfillment of God’s promise that they would possess the whole land of Canaan. Long after Abraham’s day, however, the nation’s idolatry, sin and other failures broke the conditions of its covenant relationship with God, and the nation failed to retain the land of Canaan “for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8).

Their difficulties and failures, however, “happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition” (1 Cor. 10:11). The book of Hebrews urges believers to learn from the Israelites’ experience and to “harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness, when . . . I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest . . . but exhort one another daily, while it is called today: lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:8-19). Hebrews identifies the land as the rest of the Lord, and

sin and unbelief as the obstacles that prevent us from entering his rest.

Abraham and other faithful Old Testament figures “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” and “they that say such things declare plainly that they seek...a better country, that is, an heavenly” country (Heb. 11:13-16). When believers, through the new birth, are translated into the kingdom of God’s dear Son (Col. 1:13) they’ve set foot in “a better country” than any they’re going to find in the middle east. That’s heavenly real estate you’re walking on, believers, *the* high-rent district of all time—and eternity. The only zoning restrictions: no sin or unbelief.

The inheritance of the “land” is clearly for believers since they are Abraham’s seed, and heirs to the promises (Gal. 3:29). But the New Testament writers did not share the narrow, natural view many people today have of that promise. Paul, for example, did not speak in meager and limited terms about the land “from the river of Egypt unto...the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18). Instead, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul said the promise to Abraham was “that he should be the heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13). And indeed that is the inheritance of the believers (Mt. 5:5), both now and in the eternity of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1), because “*all things* are yours, whether...*the world*, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come” (1 Cor. 3:21,22).

Paul never said he had “great heaviness and continual sorrow” (Rom. 9:2) over the question of whether Israel could retain title to its real estate holdings. He did not say it was his “heart’s desire and prayer to God” (Rom. 10:1) that his kinsmen might forever occupy a certain piece of geography. Paul mourned their separation from a *heavenly* land, and he had nothing to say about any other property.

He sorrowed continually because so many of his own people could not see that “they which are the children of the flesh are *not* the children of God” (Rom. 9:8). His heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel was not a piece of land but “*that they might be saved*” (Rom. 10:1).

Today, for both Jews and Gentiles, our physical place of residence is irrelevant. What matters is our spiritual address. We should be seated with Christ in the heavenlies.

## The Seed

The fourth and greatest promise to Abraham (see chapter 5) was the promise of the Messiah.

Because Abraham met the conditions laid down by God, he was promised that the Messiah would come from his line of descent.

“In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:18).

That Seed is the purpose and testimony of all scripture, in origin preceding not only Abraham’s day but time itself. The coming of the Seed was purposed before the foundations of the world, and through that Seed it has always been God’s plan to bring blessing, not to one tiny nation, but to every nation. The Seed is Christ, the Life (Jn. 1:4) and Light (Jn. 1:9) of the world, who gives to as many as will receive him “power to become the sons of God” (Jn. 1:12).

Within the dimension of time, the Seed was first promised in the garden of Eden, during the terrible aftermath of the fall of Adam. In words prophetic of the ages-long struggle between good and evil, and the victory at Calvary where the Seed triumphed over all his foes (Col. 2:15), God said: “I will put enmity between thee (the serpent, “the great dragon called the Devil, and Satan,” Rev. 12:9) 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 was preserved through Noah, who “found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8) and then promised to Abraham through the line of descent of Isaac, the child of promise. “God said unto Abraham...in Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Gen. 21:12). The line of descent subsequently was prophesied to be through Judah (“The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be,” Gen. 49:10) and through David (“Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne . . . shall be established for ever,” Ps. 89:35-37).

God’s purpose regarding the Seed was not clearly understood until the Lord Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection and “opened their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” (Lk. 24:45). Then they, and Paul, “as one born out of due time” (1 Cor. 15:8), expounded the eternal purpose of God through the writings of the New Testament. Until that time, the true meaning of the Old Testament had been unknown. That is why the Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament, with the latter standing forever as the final authority in Biblical revelation.

With his eyes opened, Paul saw that God had not referred to all of Abraham’s descendants when he said “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” He recognized that God “saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, *which is Christ*” (Gal. 3:16).

Christ, the Seed, “came unto his own, and his own received him not” (Jn. 1:11). “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the Sons of God” (Jn. 1:12) and to become “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

If we allow Christ and the New Testament to “open our understanding” we will see that all the centuries of the Old Testament era were merely part of the progressive unfolding of God’s eternal *and unchanging* purpose “which he purposed”—not in the nation of Israel, but—“in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11). Despite natural Israel’s failures, God always preserved “a remnant according to the election of grace” (Rom. 11:5) through whom, “when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4), the Seed.

Just as the seed promised in Eden (Gen. 3:15) was not the nation of Israel, so the seed of Abraham to whom the promises belong is not the nation of Israel. In both cases, the Seed was Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, and through him the promises are secured to the church which is his body.

In Jesus’ day many Jews who lacked spiritual insight thought it was Israel’s destiny to one day rise to worldwide political rule. Their natural, undiscerning interpretation of the Old Testament scriptures left them haughtily certain that the scriptures testified to their coming national supremacy.

But Christ told them to look again. “*Search* the scriptures,” he said, for “they are they which testify *of me*” (Jn. 5:39).

In the light of the words of our Lord it is saddening to see many believers today searching the Old Testament instead for passages that testify to the future of the physical, political nation of Israel.

*Search* them, yes, by all means. For they testify *of Jesus*. But search them with “the eyes of your understanding being enlightened” (Eph. 1:18) and not with the distorted vision of the Pharisees and scribes.

## The Chosen People

In chapter 6 we discussed the promises made to Israel under the leadership of Moses.

God said that “*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*” (Ex. 19:5,6).

Although we previously used the terminology of dispensationalist theologians in identifying that agreement between the Lord and the Israelites as the Mosaic Covenant, it must now be said that it is misleading to imply that God has made a whole string of different covenants with man. Historic Christian teaching knew only two major covenants, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant (the Old Testament and the New Testament), but those terms themselves refer only to the earlier and later revelation of God’s *one* eternal plan to send the Seed, Jesus Christ, as Redeemer and King.

The dividing line between the old and the new understanding of God’s one great, eternal covenant with mankind was at Calvary; the Old Testament revelation of the covenant was vastly inferior to the New Testament revelation that Christ gave his disciples after his resurrection, and that the Holy Spirit gave the disciples after Christ’s ascension. All of the other so-called covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, etc.) were nothing more than stages in the progressive revelation of God’s eternal plan.

The promises God made to the Israelites in Moses’ day were clearly conditional. In that respect, the biggest word God used was one of the smallest words: “if.” God obligated himself to fulfill the promises only *if* Israel fulfilled the conditions. The major condition again was obedience—“if ye will *obey* my voice . . .

When “all the people answered together and said, *All that the Lord hath spoken we will do*” (Ex. 19:8), they bound themselves to perform *the entire law*, all the commandments, judgments and ordinances, because “*cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them*” (Gal. 3:10; Dt. 27:26). The covenant subsequently was annulled through Israel’s repeated and flagrant disregard for God’s laws.

In dealing with the large and diverse nation of men, women and children that came out of Egypt, God put the law in a specific and detailed form in which it could be transmitted from generation to generation. But Paul said the law of Moses had merely been “added because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19). For how long? Only “*till the seed should come* to whom the promise was made” (Gal. 3:19). That Seed, as we have already shown, was Christ. And Christ “is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Rom. 10:4).

The law then was a temporary instrument added by God because of Israel’s transgressions. It was a “schoolmaster” (Gal. 3:24,25) set in the midst of Israel to maintain some semblance of order until the nation served its purpose. Israel was destined to survive only until the Messiah came forth from it. At that point the new and spiritual Israel took over as the special instrument for fulfilling the eternal purpose of God. The law was necessary to guarantee the survival of the faithful remnant within Israel until that day in the fullness of time when Christ “was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (Jn. 1:14).

The New Testament abounds with proof that the law never gave anyone right standing with God. How could it if a man was cursed if he continued not in *all things* (Gal. 3:10) that were written in the law? “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (Jas. 2:10).

Paul said that “no man is justified by the law in the sight of God. . . . for, the just shall live by faith, and the law is not of faith” (Gal. 3:11,12). He said the law merely brought knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20) but “a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Well, if the Israelites in Moses’ day weren’t justified in the sight of God by keeping the intricacies of the Mosaic law, by what means were they justified?

You guessed it. The same way you are. By the gospel. “For unto us was the gospel preached, *as well as unto them*: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it” (Heb. 4:2). Like Abraham, Moses foresaw the first advent of Christ as the only hope of Israel:

“For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:22,23).

The promises to Abraham were fulfilled because of Abraham’s faith and obedience but the Israelites as a larger nation did not qualify for similar treatment. By failing to meet the conditions laid down by God, the nation of Israel forever forfeited its right to the promises. The church is the spiritual heir to the same promises.

The New Testament writers said that the physical nation of Israel that existed in their day was *not* the “holy nation” of Exodus 19:6. In their day, *and today, and forever*, the church alone fits that description. Peter said it is only those who believe in Christ (1 Pet. 2:7) who are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9).

“Chosen” is a word that is tossed around rather loosely these days. Although, as we have just seen, Peter used it to refer to the church, many people earnestly but mistakenly use it to refer to the natural Jews of our own time. They eagerly describe the twentieth-century nation of Israel as “God’s chosen people.” That may not be believed, however, by those who believe the New Testament. The Authorized or King James version of the Bible uses the word “chosen” 30 times in the New Testament—but *never to refer to the nation of Israel*.

The prophet Isaiah saw a time when God would “yet choose Israel” (Is. 14:1), and the apostle Paul saw the fulfillment of that prophecy when he assured “the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1) that God “*hath chosen us*” (Eph. 1:4).

The teaching of the New Testament has not changed in the last 1,900 years, and we ignore its truth at our peril. The church was the Israel of God’s choice in the first century and it is still the Israel of his choice today.

As “heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29), only believers in Christ fit the Old Testament description of those people God brought forth out of the world “to be unto him a people of inheritance” (Dt. 4:20; Gal. 3:18; Col. 1:12, 3:24; Heb. 9:15).

It is spiritual Israel alone which he has chosen “to be his peculiar people” (Ex. 19:5; Dt. 26:18; Ti. 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9).

## **A Greater Kingdom**

The regal nature of the church’s inheritance becomes increasingly evident as we begin to study God’s dealings with David.

We have seen preliminary references to the royal line of descent of the Seed in Jacob’s prophecy that the One who ultimately would wield the royal sceptre would come from the tribe

of Judah (Gen. 49:10), and in the conditional promise that Israel would be a “*kingdom of priests*” (Ex. 19:6). Balaam also prophesied of the sceptre that would rise out of Israel (Num. 24:17).

But it is in the so-called Davidic Covenant that the royal aspects of the church’s inheritance are most vividly foretold.

In chapter 8 we showed how the disobedience of Israel’s kings and people annulled the conditional promise to David of a house, a kingdom and a throne that would “be established *for ever*” (2 Sam. 7:16). As will be seen, however, the promise of a natural king on the throne of a natural kingdom cannot even be compared with the glory of the Greater David who ascended to a greater throne after Calvary.

If we read carefully God’s covenant with David we will see that the promises were to be fulfilled through David’s “seed” (2 Sam. 7:12). The Seed, of course, is Christ “which was made of the seed of David” (Rom. 1:3).

God promised that the seed of David would “build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever” (2 Sam. 7:13). The natural fulfillment of that promise came about when David’s son Solomon built the first temple of Israel but, of course, disobedience caused Solomon’s temple, throne and kingdom to crumble and disappear rather than survive forever. The complete fulfillment of the promises to David occurred after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension.

The house, or temple, that Solomon built for God’s name was a natural type of the greater spiritual house of God, the church, which was, and is, built by One “greater than Solomon” (Lk. 11:31). Christ told Peter that “*I will build my church*” (Mt. 16:18), and for more than 19 centuries he has been doing exactly that, thus fulfilling God’s promise that the Seed would “build an house for my name.”

More will be said later on the subject of temples, when we discuss the promises proclaimed in the era of the prophets, but right now we want to learn more about the kingdom and throne promised to the seed of David. And the most important thing we can say in that regard is that, despite the denials of some doubting theologians, the kingdom promised in David’s day, the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, was manifested by Christ at his first advent.

More than nineteen centuries ago, the Son of God “called the people unto him with his disciples also” (Mk. 8:34) and said unto them (among other things): “*Verily I say unto you, that there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power*” (Mk. 9:1).

The people Christ spoke to were roughly his own age, that is, they were born about 1,977 years ago. And since Christ would not lie, we know that some of them had to live to see the kingdom of God.

If the kingdom has not yet come, as dispensationalists teach, those people must still be alive, somewhere on planet earth, at the ripe old age of about 1,977 years.

If the kingdom doesn’t come for another 23 years, they will hit the remarkable age of 2,000.

We know, however, that they have all long ago died, or were killed, and that some of them did in fact see the kingdom of God in their lifetimes. Which of them? Those who were born again and thus empowered to “see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3).

The kingdom of God is not a natural, earthly, political kingdom that will be established at some uncertain date in a little country on the Mediterranean. It is a present, eternal, universal, immovable and spiritual kingdom. Taken in its proper context, the Greek word *basileia*, translated kingdom in the New Testament, does not mean a physical kingdom with a specific and

limited location; it means the rule or reign or authority of God.

Once again we are looking at the principle of first the natural, then the spiritual. The kingdom of David, king of Israel, was a natural kingdom. The kingdom of God, manifested by Christ, the Greater David, is a spiritual kingdom. It is the Lordship of Christ in the hearts of his people; it is his authority guiding and directing their lives. When we read the words “the kingdom of God” we should read them as “the authority of God” or “the Lordship of God.”

The kingdom of David was a visible kingdom; it could be seen and observed. But “the kingdom of God cometh not with observation...for, behold, the kingdom of God (the Lordship or authority of God) is within you” (Lk. 17:20,21).

The kingdom of David was a kingdom of physical things like meat and drink. But the kingdom of God (the Lordship or authority of God) “is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17).

The kingdom of David was a kingdom of this world but the kingdom of God (the Lordship or authority of God) “is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36).

You could see the kingdom of David from adjoining countries, and enter it by crossing its boundaries, but “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (the Lordship or authority of God)...except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (the Lordship or authority of God)” (Jn. 3:3,5).

Many well-intentioned people have accepted the dispensationalist theory that Christ came to re-establish the old Davidic kingdom and thereby bring “good government” to the world. They believe that the Messiah came to rule with a “literal” rod of iron and to reform society by enforcing high moral and ethical standards that the world otherwise was, and is, unwilling to obey.

To the casual observer that sounds like a highly commendable program, and for God it would be easy to accomplish. But it would not change the fallen nature of the subjects of such a kingdom. Because Christ *now* has all power in heaven and in earth (Mt. 28:18; Eph. 1:21) it would be a simple thing indeed for him to sit down on a physical throne in some physical kingdom and from there forcibly impose his will upon human society. But enforced government is not God’s way. Christ said only the governments of the world rule in that manner (Mk. 10:42).

In the case of worldly governments, *all* who are within their reach are aware of the ruler’s authority but in the case of the kingdom of God it is not *all* but “whosoever will.” Whosoever will repent and believe on Jesus as Lord and Saviour. The whosoever-who-won’t cannot see the kingdom or rule or authority of God in this present age (although it will be painfully evident to them at Christ’s return when “every eye shall see him”—Rev. 1:7) because “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). But it is a shame when believers, who should be able to discern spiritual things, continue to view them with the carnal, or fleshly, vision of babes (1 Cor. 3:1).

“God is a Spirit” (Jn. 4:24) and his kingdom (his rule or Lordship) is spiritual. Although he chose to reveal the truth of his spiritual kingdom in progressive stages of revelation to man, particularly through the natural type of David’s kingdom, God never wanted those who believe in his Son to confuse the natural types of the Davidic kingdom with the spiritual realities of the kingdom of God.

Christ, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (Rev. 5:5), has chosen, and continues to choose, “a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6, 5:10) to “show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

These people, the church, God has “translated into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13).

Note the regal adornments of the King. His throne “is for ever and ever” (Heb. 1:8). He has “a sceptre of righteousness” (Heb. 1:8). He is crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:9). He is “the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God” and to him belong “honor and glory for ever and ever” (1 Tim. 1:17). He is a priestly king “after the order of Meichisedec

King of righteousness, and...King of peace” (Heb. 6:20-7:2). He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14).

Gabriel told Mary that God would give her son Jesus “the throne of his father David” (Lk. 1:32) and Peter, on the day of Pentecost, confirmed that God had done exactly that. In his great sermon to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem, Peter said that when God promised David that “he would *raise up* Christ to sit on his throne,” he “spoke of the resurrection of Christ” and “this Jesus hath God *raised up* . . . . being by the right hand of God exalted” (Acts 2:30-33). As we would expect, the Greater David ascended to a greater throne than that of the Old Testament type.

Christ resisted the efforts of people in his own day to make him a natural king. When he “perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone” (Jn. 6:15). Today, many people still would force him to be a natural king. They believe he came at first to sit on old King David’s natural throne in Jerusalem, the throne dishonored by so many unfaithful and idolatrous kings, and that he somehow failed to achieve his Father’s goal of making him a political ruler. At his second advent they believe he will accomplish what he failed to do the first time.

Such beliefs are not only foolish but dangerous. They blind believers to the present reality of the kingdom of God, They focus our gaze on the dead fig tree instead of on the living and growing olive tree. And they imply that Jesus Christ at his first advent came as a political revolutionary seeking to overthrow the established political rule in Israel. If Christ really had sought to do that, he would have been guilty of sedition, and his crucifixion would have been justified by the law of the land. In fact, as should be glaringly evident, he sought no earthly kingdom (“my kingdom is not of this world”—Jn. 18:36), and he was crucified illegally, “the just for the unjust” (1 Pet. 3:18).

The four kingdoms represented by the image in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan. 2:38-43) were Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, and the fifth kingdom, the “stone cut out without hands” (Dan. 2:34), was the kingdom of “the God of heaven” (Dan. 2:44). In interpreting the dream, Daniel made it clear that the latter kingdom was not to be set up at some date which is yet future from this present time but that it would be manifested *in the days of the other kingdoms* (Dan. 2:44). That meant it had to appear, and did appear, *before* the fall of the Roman Empire, which occurred 1,500 years ago.

The kingdom, or authority, or rule of God is a reality in this present age, and it will appear in its final, perfected form in the eternity of the new heavens and new earth when Christ returns.

The kingdom was manifested by Christ at his first advent, but only to those with eyes to see. When he comes again, the whole world will see the power and glory of that present kingdom (which believers should be able to see in this age). Having rebelled against God’s rule and authority throughout their lifetimes, unbelievers then will be able to do nothing but beg the rocks and mountains to fall on them to hide them from his wrath (Rev. 6:16).

## **Joint-Heirs With Christ**

The Lord Jesus declared that things changed—forever—at his first advent.

“The law and the prophets were until John (the Baptist),” he said. “Since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it” (Lk. 16:16).

Christ gave Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 16:19), and Peter used the keys to open the kingdom, first to the Jews (Acts chapter 2) and then to the Gentiles (Acts chapter 10).

After Calvary, God’s purpose was no longer limited to little Israel. From then on the gospel was preached, as Christ directed, “in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8), and Satan, who had once deceived all the other nations, was powerless to halt the gospel’s worldwide dissemination.

Christ said the spiritual kingdom of God, the authority or Lordship of God, is now preached, and he never said that any natural kingdom would ever again be preached. The spiritual reality has forever replaced the natural type.

Christ today reigns over everything. He has all power, o~ authority, in heaven and in earth (Mt. 28:18). Paul wanted believers to understand that fact. He prayed that “the eyes of your understanding” might be enlightened (Eph. 1:18) that you might know, among other things, that God has seated Christ “at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Eph. 1:20,21).

Far above “all power?” Yes, because at Calvary “he spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15), Even Satan? Yes, Christ said (Mt. 12:29) that he would bind the strong man (Satan) and then spoil his house (the world that lay under Satan’s sway). And just before Calvary he said: “*Now* is the judgment of this world: *now* shall the prince of this world be cast out” (Jn. 12:31).

So Christ reigns today above every opposing power or principality, and he alone is worthy “to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing” (Rev. 5:12).

And yet he shares his great and universal victory with those who are his.

If we believe God’s word, Christ and his people are joined together as one (Eph. 5:30-32). He is the head and believers are the body, and the body is “the *fulness of him* that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:22,23).

He shares with believers the inheritance that is his as the seed of Abraham and the seed of David. Believers are “joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17). Believers are “kings and priests unto God” (Rev. 1:6). Believers are the “heirs of the kingdom” (Jas. 2:5).

Believers share in Christ’s present reign because God has “delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13), and has “raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6). That means we’re seated where Christ is, far above every other power.

We don’t have to wait for some future kingdom to be set up in the middle east to start reigning<sub>1</sub> with him. We reign with the Lord Jesus now because “they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall *reign in life* by one, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17).

The new birth enables believers to see and enter the kingdom of God but each believer has to do what Jesus prescribed—press into the kingdom (Lk. 16:16). One of the ways to do that is to recognize that you are reigning now, far above every irritating, painful and disastrous circumstance of life. You can’t do that, however, if you think the reign of Christ, and your reign

with him, is merely a future hope.

Today there are “so many kinds of voices in the world” (1 Cor. 14:10) that believers must be very sure that the voices they are listening to are saying things that line up with the superior revelation of the New Testament. If we’re listening only to Old Testament voices we’ll learn something perhaps about natural types but nothing about spiritual realities.

Ask your favorite “voice”—be he preacher or layman, author or broadcaster—whether he believes in the present reality of the “everlasting” kingdom of God (Ps. 145:13), and in the present reign of Christ and those who are his.

Does he believe that Christ presently has all power and glory—that *now* “thy saints . . . speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power” (Ps. 145:10,11)—or does he believe Scofield’s claim that Christ’s power and glory will come only in a future natural kingdom?

How about the Lord’s Prayer? If your “voice” preaches the kingdom of God only as a future hope, and primarily a Jewish hope, does he allow the church the use and comfort of that great prayer? It does, after all, refer to the present reality of the kingdom when it declares that “thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever” (Mt. 6:13).

If we have been listening to those who virtually ignore the New Testament and who instead weave together an intricate web of Old Testament scriptures to support a nineteenth-century theory that God’s eternal purpose will be consummated through a restored natural kingdom, rather than in the present and eternal spiritual kingdom, we’ve had our spiritual eyes closed. Let’s open them now to the truth of Christ’s present reign and our present reign with him.

As we said at the end of chapter 8: “An incredible thrill awaits each of us when we finally see God’s chosen people reigning with Christ in his kingdom.”

## **The Prophets Revisited**

Having seen that the promises of the so-called Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants have found, and are finding, their fulfillment in Christ and the church, let us turn now to the exciting era of the Hebrew prophets.

We will soon see that Christ and the church are also the main subjects and fulfillment of that 400-year period of great prophetic utterance.

The age of the law and the prophets ended when Christ came. Since then the kingdom of God is preached. The law, externally administered by the appropriate authorities, is still needed, not “for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners,” and for the other unrighteous types named in 1 Timothy 1:9,10. But Christ is “the end of the law” to every one who believes in him (Rom. 10:4) and his law is applied internally, in the believer’s heart and spirit, and not externally.

In the same way, Christ is the end, or fulfillment, of all that was promised by the prophets. “To *him* give all the prophets witness” (Acts 10:43; Rom. 3:21,22). The prophetic scriptures testify of *him* (Jn. 5:39; Rev. 19:10).

The place of the Israel of old in the prophets’ writings is simply understood. The prophets warned the Israelites that their unfaithfulness and disobedience would bring the wrath and judgment of God upon them, and that God would replace them with another people (the church). All promises of consolation, compassion and mercy referred either to 1) their temporary restoration after the Babylonian captivity or 2) the future blessing of individual Israelites who would believe the gospel and thus become members of the faithful remnant. Israel was restored

from captivity and preserved as a nation long enough for the Messiah and the church to come forth from it.

All remaining fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies belong to Christ and the church which is his body. The prophets foretold a golden age, future from their own time, to be ushered in by the coming of the Messiah. They “prophesied of the grace that should come. . . unto us” (1 Pet. 1:10,12) in this present age. They saw the Messiah simultaneously as Saviour and Lord, as Redeemer and King, at his first advent.

The prophets actually *spoke* of three ages, the dying age of the Old Testament dispensation, the age we have been living in since the first advent of Christ, and the final age, the eternity of the new heavens and new earth that will come with Christ’s second advent. They did not speak of a fourth age that would intervene between this present age and eternity. There are no prophecies of a return to the natural types and shadows, the “weak and beggarly elements” (Gal. 4:9) of the Old Testament dispensation. To regress from the new and spiritual Israel to the old and natural Israel would be contrary to Paul’s explanation of the divine order: “That was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual” (1 Cor. 15:46).

It is vital for believers to recognize that Christ’s ministry at his first advent was twofold: Redeemer *and* King. Again, this is a reflection of a simple spiritual principle, namely, that in God in order to go up, you first have to go down. God’s ways are the opposite of man’s ways. With man, if you’re first, you’re first. But with God, the first shall be last, and the last shall be first (Mt. 19:30; Lk. 13:30).

Christ warned men to “sit not down in the highest room” because they might have to give their place to a more honorable man and then “with shame take the lowest room.” They were instead told to take the lowest room at first, and then “when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up hither: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that *humbleth* himself shall be *exalted*” (Lk. 14:7-11).

*Thus, Christ “humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”* (Phil. 2:8). And therefore “God also hath highly *exalted* him, and given him a name *which is above every name*” (Phil. 2:9).

Through his suffering and humility Christ became the Saviour and Redeemer. But through them he also was exalted by his Father to be Lord and King. God’s principle had to hold true; since Christ humbled himself to the utmost, God also exalted him to the utmost.

There are those, however, who teach that God departed from his own basic principle in the case of his Son, They agree that Christ obediently humbled himself to the death of the cross but they deny that he then entered into his glory and power. That belief, however, is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. After his resurrection, Christ said, “*All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth*” (Mt. 28:18). And Peter testified that “the God of our fathers *hath glorified* his Son Jesus” (Acts 3:13).

Those who assert that the prophecies of Christ’s power and glory await fulfillment in a future Jewish kingdom typically claim that the prophecies of the “suffering” Messiah were fulfilled at Christ’s first advent but the prophecies of the “reigning” Messiah will not be fulfilled until his second advent. The New Scofield Reference Edition presents that improbable and unwarranted claim in these words (page 988): “The N.T. shows that His *suffering* and *glory* are separated by the present Church Age, and points forward to the Lord’s return as the time when the Davidic Covenant of blessing *through power will be fulfilled...just as the Abrahamic Covenant of*

blessing through suffering was fulfilled at His first coming.”

You can believe that if you want to but I’m sticking with what the New Testament really says, namely, that Christ long ago was “declared to be the Son of God with *power*” (Rom. 1:4). He already is “the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). James and Paul, who were uninstructed in nineteenth-century dispensationalism, said Christ is *now* the Lord of *glory* (Jas. 2:1; 1 Cor. 2:8), and Peter, who never read the fine print of the Scofield notes, said, “To him be *glory* both *now* and for ever” (2 Pet. 3:18).

Scofield, like his prolific literary descendants of our own day, insisted that the prophecies of Christ as both Redeemer and King can only be understood if they are viewed as two mountain peaks which are separated by the great valley of time (thus far more than 1,900 years) that must intervene between their separate fulfillments,

The great prophecies of the Messiah as both Saviour and King do indeed stand as twin peaks separated by a valley. *But the valley was not time; it was the grave.* It was “the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4). Because Christ obediently went *down* into the death of the cross, he was “raised *up* being by the right hand of God exalted” (Acts 2:32,33). And thus he fulfilled both sets of prophecies at his first advent. When he comes again, it will be to display his *present* power, and glory, and might, and majesty, and dominion, and honor to the whole world.

Christ’s people follow in their Master’s footsteps. When a person bows his head in repentance and believes that Christ died for that person’s sins, he too goes through a humbling and exalting process. When he “takes the lowest room,” having seen his wretched and lost condition, then he that invited him to come says, “Friend, go up higher.”

That is why we, as believers, have been raised up and seated together with Christ in the heavenlies, far above all opposing principalities, where God already “hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings” (Eph. 1:3). And that is the vision of the prophets—the triumphant Messiah and the triumphant community of redeemed people whom God has chosen.

In describing this present golden age of blessing and victory, and the ultimate perfection of the eternity to follow, the prophets were inspired to speak in simple and natural terms that would have meaning for their relatively unsophisticated hearers of 2,500 years ago. Isaiah, for example, described the nation of Israel as a vineyard (Is. 5:1). An unsaved or otherwise spiritually distressed person might be described in terms of a dry and lifeless desert but the soul of the saved “as a watered garden” (Jer. 31:12). Zion, the city of David, is the very frequent designation for the church.

Intangible characteristics frequently were described in very tangible terms. For example, Isaiah described the peaceable nature of the kingdom of God, both in this present age and in its final and perfected form in eternity, through the simple picture of a wolf and a lamb feeding together (Is. 11:6, 65:25). The kingdom of God itself, that is, the present and eternal authority of God, is frequently pictured in prophecy as a mountain (Is. 2:2; Dan. 2:35; Mic. 4:1). Spiritual blessings are often portrayed in terms of natural harvests of such things as wheat, wine, oil and the young of the flock (Jer. 31:12; Amos 9:14).

Much more could be said about the simple but poetic and highly effective language of the prophets but further examples of their art form will not make the point if it has not already been made. If the inspired New Testament revelation of the meaning of the prophecies does not illuminate the reader’s understanding, then there is nothing this side of eternity that will do the trick.

## Escape from Babylon

The Babylonian captivity was an Old Testament type or figure designed to serve as a warning and admonition to the church.

The Israelites went into a natural captivity in natural Babylon; Christians must avoid going into spiritual captivity in a spiritual Babylon.

For believers, Babylon is any kind of system or organization that offers “righteousness” or “morality” or “goodness” or “truth” through a means other than the cross of Jesus Christ. It may be a cult that from its inception deviated from sound Christian doctrine. It may be any one of countless heathen cultures. It may be a political program to create a social paradise without God. But it may also be a religious system that had its start in some great move of God’s Spirit but that now is perpetuated through dead forms and rituals, and energized only by the carnal programs of men’s traditions.

In Christ, their true King, believers have liberty and freedom. But there are other sovereigns, lesser but highly persistent, who seek to capture and enslave us. From Egypt come the hosts of Pharaoh who try to carry away mankind into the captivity of worldly sin. Those who escape their clutches by the cross of Christ may come into the promised land of heavenly living that is the inheritance of spiritual Israel. But watch out for the Babylonians who try to carry off spiritual Israelites into their false religious and moral systems!

In spiritual Babylon the believer will soon find he has lost the joy he once knew. There is no rejoicing in the souls of those who sit in captivity “by the rivers of Babylon” (Ps. 137:1). If you ever meet a believer who has fallen into the hands of a cult or some other false system you’ll soon see that he has hung his harp on the willows and cannot sing the Lord’s song in that strange land (Ps. 137:2,4).

But for those who return to the true Israel of God, there is the joy that finds utterance in these ancient words: “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing” (Ps. 126:1,2).

That is the only remaining fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies that refer to a restoration to the land. History records that the natural fulfillment of such prophecies took place thousands of years ago (see chapter 11). But the spiritual fulfillment occurs time and again, down through the centuries, as God’s people are delivered from one kind of spiritual Babylon after another.

In some generations spiritual Babylon has been the enforced captivity of a state religion; in others a voluntary and comfortable slide into a fashionable and socially acceptable, but dead, form of religion, or the preaching of a “gospel~ of social reform rather than personal re-birth. But whatever the nature of the captivity, each deliverance fulfills Isaiah’s great prophecy that “the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away” (Is. 51:11).

Or Amos’ great prophecy: “I will bring again (end) the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build my 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” (Amos 9:14,15). Amos was speaking there of spiritual blessings to come upon spiritual Israelites in that spiritual land described in chapter 27.

The prophecy of the dry bones in the 37th chapter of Ezekiel gives a similar picture of the blessing and spiritual life that are breathed upon believers when they return from Babylon to Zion. Ezekiel prophesied of the wind that would “breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (Ezek. 37:9). That is the wind of the Spirit (Jn. 3:8), for God promises the captives who are freed that “I . . . shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land” (Ezek. 37:14).

When Ezekiel further prophesied that God would gather his people together and make them “one nation in the land . . . and David my servant shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd . . . and (I) will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore . . . my tabernacle also shall be with them” (Ezek. 37:21 -28), he clearly was speaking of the church. God’s people do not belong in Babylon; they belong together as one spiritual nation under the rule of Christ, the Greater David who is the “one shepherd” of the “one fold” (Jn. 10:16) and whose tabernacle or dwelling place is “in the midst of” those who gather in his name (Mt. 18:20).

There are some who believe that the marvelous promises above refer to a twentieth-century restoration of the natural Jews to the land of their forefathers but there is no scriptural basis for such a belief. All of the Old Testament promises of the Jews’ return to the land and the rebuilding of the city and the temple were prophesied *before* the completion of the return and rebuilding that occurred after the Babylonian captivity. After their fulfillment, some 2,400 years ago, there were *no further prophecies* of a return to the land and a rebuilding of the city and the temple. An event is no longer prophesied *after* it has occurred.

The New Testament certainly says nothing of any future return by natural Israel to the land. The word “return” is used 245 times in the King James translation of the Old Testament, including the numerous references to the ancient return from Babylon, but only 13 times in the New Testament, and *never* to refer to another such return. The word “land” is used more than 1,600 times in the King James translation of the Old Testament but only 50 times in the New Testament, and again, in the latter, *never* in the context of another return to the physical land. The New Testament reflects no interest in physical real estate.

There are many today who choose to ignore the obvious fact that the natural fulfillment of those prophecies occurred more than two millennia ago. There are many who attempt to explain away the equally obvious fact that the only remaining fulfillment of the prophecies belongs to the church. Such contentions are unsupported by the New Testament, and are based upon a highly inconsistent use of a so-called “literal” interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies. But if a “literal” reading requires that the prophetic references to returning Israel mean the “literal,” natural, physical twentieth-century nation of Israel, then surely consistency demands that the place from which the Jewish people return must be the “literal,” natural, physical twentieth-century kingdom of Babylon. But where is that physical kingdom today?

The tragedy of a misplaced emphasis on political events involving the physical nation that today is called Israel is that it diverts believers from the far more important truths that the New Testament teaches about the promised land into which we already have come.

Believers will not see themselves seated in the heavenlies with Christ (Eph. 2:6), reigning above the pain, and tribulation, and aggravation of life, if their vision and understanding of the “land” is earthly and natural rather than heavenly and spiritual.

## **A Greater City**

Just as the church is the true Israel of God, so also it is the true Jerusalem.

Therefore, since Calvary, the Old Testament promises of blessing and favor for the city of Jerusalem have found, are finding and will find their fulfillment in the church, and not in the physical city in the middle east.

God's people today are not those whose ancestors came with Moses to mount Sinai, to "the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire" (Heb. 12:18). God's people are only those who *themselves have come* "unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22), which is the church of born-again believers in Christ.

Paul taught that the chosen people were not those "from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to (gives birth to) bondage and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children" (Gal. 4:24,25). Rather, the "children of promise" (Gal. 4:28), the believers in Christ, now and forever, are the people of the only city that has a special place in God's purpose, and that city is "Jerusalem which is above" and which is free (Gal. 4:26).

As the true city of God, the church was in the vision of the Old Testament saints as long ago as Abraham. That father of the faithful, we are told, did not go forth in search of a physical city built by man. Instead, "he looked for a city which hath foundations *whose builder and maker is God*" (Heb. 11:10). God does not build cities of stone and wood. God is a Spirit, and the city of God is a spiritual city.

Thousands of years ago Isaiah prophesied of that spiritual city that would be called "the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (Is. 60:14). That the prophet foresaw something greater than just another earthly city is clear from his prediction that the true Jerusalem would not have walls of stone and gates of wood. Instead, he proclaimed that the city would call its walls Salvation, and its gates Praise (Is. 60:18), which the true church does but which the city in the middle east does not.

But even better testimony is available. In the book of the Revelation, written nineteen centuries ago, the "first and the last...he that liveth, and was dead"...and is "alive for evermore" (Rev. 1:17,18) declared that "*the name of the city of my God... is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God*" (Rev. 3:12).

Now, one more time. What is the name of the city of God? That's right, it's not the *old* Jerusalem, built by man's hands, whose children are locked in the bondage of the unsaved. The city of God is the *new* Jerusalem, the spiritual city built by God, the community of the redeemed who make up the church.

The old city of Jerusalem in which David reigned as lord and king was only a natural type of the new and spiritual Jerusalem, the church, where Christ is Lord and King.

All Old Testament promises and prophecies about the return to, and rebuilding of, the old city of Jerusalem were fulfilled thousands of years ago. In chapter 12 we mentioned a few of the many Old Testament scriptures that describe the remarkable circumstances surrounding the rebuilding of that city after the Babylonian captivity. All remaining fulfillments of prophecies regarding the city of Jerusalem refer to spiritual Jerusalem, the church.

The primary rebuilding program for the church has involved its restoration to the apostolic pattern of the first century, following the spiritual captivity it entered in the dark ages. Since restoration involves a city with spiritual foundations, God alone is the "builder and maker" (Heb. 11:10) who guides the work. Man's programs cannot build the church (Christ said *he* would build it—Matthew 16:18) nor can such programs protect and preserve it ("except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain"—Psalm 127:1).

The book of Nehemiah aptly describes the condition of the church at the lowest depth of its captivity before the Reformation. Nehemiah saw “the walls of Jerusalem, which were broken down, and the gates (which) were consumed with fire” (Neh. 2:13), and the rubbish that covered the sound building stones (Neh. 4:2). The strength and protection of the true Jerusalem are its walls of Salvation and its gates of Praise. When those are destroyed, and when the rubbish of men’s traditions covers the sound building stones of other church truth, captivity is the inevitable result. The promise of the scriptures, however, is that the hand of God is good upon those who rebuild under his direction (Neh. 2:18).

The New Testament proves conclusively that the church is the dwelling place of God (see, for example, Jn. 14:23; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:22, 3:17; Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:5). That being the case, the Old Testament prophecies that refer to Zion as the dwelling place of the Lord *must find their fulfillment in the church*.

In the Old Testament Isaiah spoke of the church when he said: “Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the holy one of Israel *in the midst of thee*” (Is. 12:6). In the New Testament Christ spoke of the church in the same way when he said: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I *in the midst of them*” (Mt. 18:20).

In the Old Testament, Isaiah prophesied the first advent of Christ in these words: “Behold, *hay in Zion* for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation” (Is. 28:16). In the New Testament we are told repeatedly that the precious stone, Jesus Christ, became the sure foundation of only one Zion, the spiritual Zion which is the church (Mt. 21:42-44; 1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:5-7). To the natural Zion that rejected him he was not, and is not, a foundation but a stumblingstone and a rock of offence (Mt. 21:42-44; Rom. 9:32,33; 1 Cor. 1:23; 1 Pet. 2:7,8).

Many references to Zion in the Psalms also find their fulfillment in the church. As the true Zion of God, the church has been chosen by the Lord as his habitation *for ever* (Ps. 132:13,14). It was of the church that God spoke when he said:

“I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread. I will also clothe her priests with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy” (Ps. 132:15,16).

As “mount Zion” and “the city of the great King,” believers in Christ have the best location in the universe; they are truly “beautifully situated” (Ps. 48:1,2).

The ultimate perfection of the church, that city foursquare, will not come until the eternity of the new heavens and new earth, as described in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation. But even now, as the dwelling place of the Creator of the universe, “glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God” (Ps. 87:3).

## **A Greater Temple**

The only temple in which God has any interest, now and forever, is the body of Christ.

More than nineteen centuries ago Jesus stood in front of the old temple in Jerusalem, after driving out the money changers, and said to the Jews: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:19). In their blindness, all they could see was the physical temple looming behind him. “But he spake of the temple of his body” (Jn. 2:21).

Today, many believers suffer from a similar case of spiritual blindness, “not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor. 11:29). God speaks of the glorious body of Christ, but all that the blind can

“see” is the empty hope of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

God does not dwell within the cold, dead stones of “temples made with hands” (Acts 7:48) but “ye (believers) are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16).

Isaiah prophesied that the true house of the Lord would be a house of prayer for all nations (Is. 56:7; Mk. 11:17) and in fulfillment of that prophecy believers of every nation are today, as living stones, built into a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), “an habitation of God through the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22), a “building fitly framed together” as “an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21).

Peter said *the church* is “the house of God” (1 Pet. 4:17). The writer of the book of Hebrews said *the church* is the house of Christ (Heb. 3:6). And Paul repeatedly said that *believers* are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16,17; 6:19).

Despite the perfect clarity of this New Testament teaching, there are those who insist it is part of God’s eternal purpose to restore the “temple of Solomon” that was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, and with it the ritual burnt offerings and sacrifices. A careful reading of the Bible, however, shows that there is no scriptural basis, in either the Old or the New Testament, to support such a claim.

The natural fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a rebuilding of the temple occurred when the temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity (see chapter 13). All such prophecies were made *before* the rebuilding of the temple, and after their fulfillment 2,400 years ago there were no further prophecies of an additional future fulfillment. There remains, however, the far greater spiritual fulfillment for the church that “groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21).

Because it is so obvious that the Old Testament prophecies of a restored temple were fulfilled after the captivity, those people who predict a twentieth-century restoration of the temple (as a vital part of God’s eternal purpose) are hard-pressed to back their claims with compelling proof. Typically they rely on the references to a temple in Daniel’s prophecy of the 70 weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) and in Christ’s prophecy on the mount of Olives (Mt. 24, Mk. 13, Lk. 21). Taken in their context, however, those passages clearly prophesied the *destruction* of the rebuilt temple that occurred in A.D. 70 (see Dan. 9:26; Mt. 24:2; Mk. 13:2; Lk. 21:6) and not its restoration in the twentieth century.

A third portion of scripture that sometimes is used is in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians where he warns about the person who is generally taken to be the Antichrist, “who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (2 Thess. 2:4). The fatal flaw in that argument lies in Paul’s definition of “the temple of God” because he tells us time and again that believers in Christ are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16,17; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22). When Paul referred to believers of this New Testament age as the temple (as in the verses just cited) he used the Greek word *naos* for temple. But when he referred to the physical temple in Jerusalem (Acts 22:17; 24:12,18; 25:8; 26:21; 1 Cor. 9:13) he used the Greek word *hieron* for temple. *Naos* is the word for temple used in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and therefore (however else you may interpret that verse) it is obvious that Paul did not mean that the person he referred to was going to sit in a physical temple, in this century or any other.

The seekers after a rebuilt natural temple speak of it as the “third temple” of the Jews. The first temple, of course, was the one built by Solomon. The second was the temple built after the return from Babylon. At that point, all of the prophecies regarding the rebuilding of a natural temple were fulfilled. But if you don’t believe that, if you insist that a third physical temple was

prophesied in the Old Testament, then it's easy to demonstrate from historical records that a third temple also was built.

In *The Complete Works of Flavius Josephus* (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Mich.) the historian Josephus tells (page 334) how King Herod built an entirely new temple upon the site of the second temple shortly before the birth of Jesus. The temple he built, the Jews' third temple, was the one destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. Herod told the Jews he wanted to build a new temple because the temple built by their forefathers after the return from Babylon was not equal in height to the temple built by Solomon. After assuring the Jews that "he would not pull down their temple till all things were gotten ready for building it up entirely again," Herod "*took away the old foundations*, and laid others, and erected the temple upon them."

The Jews' extreme dislike for Herod would not allow them to admit that their new temple had been built by him, and thus an editorial footnote to the above passage says: "The fancy of the modern Jews, in calling this temple, which was really the third of their temples, the second temple, followed so long by later Christians, seems to be without any solid foundation."

Another passage sometimes used to support the claim of a future rebuilding of the temple is in Acts chapter 15 where the apostle James quoted the prophecy of Amos 9:11,12: "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" (Acts 15:15-17).

As James was well aware, Amos' prophecy referred to the tabernacle built by David for the ark, and not to the temple built by Solomon. At the time that Amos prophesied, the old tabernacle, or tent, had fallen down but the temple was still in full operation. In the temple, very few ever had access to the holiest part which contained the ark of the covenant, symbolic of the presence of God. But when the Israelites in David's day brought the ark to Jerusalem and "set it in the midst of the tent that David had pitched for it" (1 Chron. 16:1), "every one of Israel, both man and woman" (1 Chron. 16:3) was there to rejoice in the presence of God, and to be blessed and fed.

Amos thus prophesied of a future time when access to God would be freely offered to *all*, through Christ who is the true and better Tabernacle (Heb. 8:2, 9:11). James, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, declared that the prophecy was fulfilled in the first century by the conversion of the first Gentiles. Rather than supporting the erroneous theory of a future temple and a return to Mosaic ritual, the account in Acts 15 is another solid piece of evidence showing that God's eternal purpose is to be consummated only through the spiritual temple that is the church.

It is equally foolish to expect God ever again to honor animal sacrifices offered in a future temple after Jesus has "offered one sacrifice for sins for *ever*" (Heb. 10:12). The scriptures say that God had no pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices (Heb. 10:5-10) and that after Christ's one perfect, eternal sacrifice "there is *no more* offering for sin" (Heb. 10:18). The sacrifices God desires from his people are such things as obedience (1 Sam. 15:22), mercy (Hos. 6:6; Mt. 9:13), faith (Phil. 2:17) and praise (Jer. 33:11; Heb. 13:15). As people who are themselves priests unto God (Rev. 1:6), and royal ones at that (1 Pet. 2:9), believers offer themselves, their lives, and all that they have and are, as "a living sacrifice, holy, (and) acceptable unto God" (Rom. 12:1). When Christ, who is the glory of God, left the temple for the last time, it signified God's final rejection of the people who had so long rejected his rule and authority (1 Sam. 8:7). Christ's departure signified that the glory of God was gone forever from the natural temple. It was left to the Jews "desolate" (Mt. 23:38), meaning empty of the presence of God. From there Christ went

to the mount of Olives where he predicted the destruction of the city and temple (which occurred in A.D. 70). Ezekiel prophesied that sequence of events in these words: “And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city” (Ezek. 11:23).

In the years to come, it is not inconceivable that a new Jewish temple might be built in the old city of Jerusalem. But such a building is not prophesied in the scriptures, and it would have no significance in God’s eternal purpose. To say that the construction of another temple of stone is the goal and desire of God is to say that God wants to return to “the weak and beggarly elements” (Gal. 4:9) that he so emphatically has told his people to avoid. Doesn’t such a belief do “despite unto the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29)?

What would such a rebuilt temple accomplish? Christ was not worshipped and revered in the temple in the first century. And when the apostles preached Christ there they were arrested (Acts 5:18) and beaten (Acts 5:40). Would it be much different in a rebuilt Jewish temple today? Surely such a structure would not be built to the honor and glory of the Lord Jesus.

So let’s shake off any lingering fascination we might have with ancient, dusty temples built by man’s hands, however interesting their history might have been, and open our eyes to the only building that matters in God’s great purpose—the spiritual temple that is the church.

## **A Better Covenant**

In the last four chapters we have reappraised what the old Hebrew prophets had to say about the land, the city and the temple in the light of New Testament revelation. We have not reappraised the prophecies that refer to the *people* of Christ’s present, eternal kingdom but at this point a re-reading of chapter 14 should make it quickly apparent that the people the prophets so poetically described are the believers in Christ.

In Part 3 of this book we have now demonstrated that all of the promises God made in the days of Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets were merely natural types of the far greater spiritual realities that were ushered in at the first advent of Christ.

Although the author has done his best to present these truths in words and ways that are worthy of their supreme importance, it is obvious that the vast, eternal nature of the concepts involved would easily defeat the best efforts of writers far more skilled than this one. For that reason, the reader must supply his own spiritual insights in those areas where this study has been lacking. Those who receive these things “with all readiness of mind” and “search the scriptures, whether these things (be) so” (Acts 17:11), will be rewarded with many further revelations of the ways in which God is fulfilling Old Testament promise and prophecy through the church. By way of making restitution for some of the literary deficiencies of this book, however, let me steer you to an inspired author who literally wrote the textbook on this subject. I refer, of course, to the gifted and anointed writer of the book of Hebrews. That book, perhaps more than any of the books of the Bible, stands as a monumental source of frustration and embarrassment to those who teach that God plans to return one day to the natural trappings and embellishments of the old Jewish economy, to the natural land and city, the natural law and ordinances, the natural kingdom and throne, and the natural temple and sacrifices.

Along with the other New Testament writers, the author of Hebrews saw the total and overwhelming superiority of the new and better age that dawned at Calvary. Like them he saw that all of the people, and events, and institutions of the former dispensation were merely

shadows of the better things that God reserved for this present age, and for the eternity of the new heavens and new earth. Like them he realized that after Calvary the natural types and figures had served their purpose and were vanishing away, having been replaced forever by the eternal and spiritual realities.

That was a lesson the early church leaders had learned the hard way, often through great personal embarrassment. Take Peter, for example. When he and James and John accompanied the Master to the mountain where Christ was transfigured, Peter. “not knowing what he said” (Lk. 9:33), suggested building three tabernacles, one each for Christ, Moses and Elijah. The rebuke to Peter was immediate and frightening. “While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: *hear him*” (Lk. 9:34,35).

Moses and Elijah were representative of the law and the prophets, and the voice from heaven was warning the apostles that the law and the prophets were not even to be compared with Christ, the Son of God. Peter did not know what he was saying when he suggested equal treatment for the three. The law and the prophets were shadows but the substance and “the body is of Christ” (Col. 2:17). Hear him!

The writer of Hebrews obviously heard Christ. He does not attempt to build for the law and the prophets tabernacles that are equal to the true tabernacle that is Christ. He insists that things changed *forever* at Calvary, and he marvels that any man should desire to creep back into the imperfect shadows of the former era after having seen the gracious light of the New Testament age.

The author of Hebrews is the finest expositor ever of the New Covenant. In his hands it is a jewel whose every facet glistens with the word “better.” Did the fathers hear the voice of the prophets? We hear the better voice of God’s Son (Heb. 1:1,2). Did the Israelites have a high priest after the Levitical order? We have a better One after the better and undying order of Meichisedec (Heb. 6:20-7:28). Did they seek, unsuccessfully, for perfection through the law? We have a better hope through the grace of God in Christ Jesus (Heb. 7:19). Did they have a worldly sanctuary with candlestick, table and shewbread, and a tabernacle with the golden censer, the ark, and the mercyseat (Heb. 9:1-5)? We have Christ, “a greater and more perfect tabernacle” (Heb. 9:11). Did they have the blood of bulls and goats that could not take away sins (Heb. 10:4)? We have the incomparably better “blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God” (Heb. 9:14). Did the Israelites receive an earthly land? We have “a better country, that is, an heavenly” (Heb. 11:16). Did they come to a mount that could be touched (Heb. 12:18)? We have come to the better mount of Zion (Heb. 12:22). Did they have the natural city of Jerusalem? We have the incomparably better “city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22).

In sum, as spiritual Israel, we have a better covenant, the New Covenant that was foretold by the prophets and that, since Calvary, has forever replaced the old and faulty covenant (Heb. 8:7) that once existed between God and Israel.

The New Covenant (the one Greek word *diatheke* is translated both covenant and testament in the King James version) is the covenant that Jeremiah prophesied. and that was fulfilled, once and for all, for all the world, whether Jew or Gentile, at the first coming of Christ. The New Covenant that God has made with the new Israelis “not according to the covenant” that he made with natural Israel, which “covenant they broke” (Jer. 31:32).

“But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel...I will put my law in

their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people...they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them” (Jer. 31 :33,34).

Ezekiel expressed it in these words: “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Ezek. 37:26,27).

In one of his many Messianic prophecies, Isaiah foretold the establishment of that covenant, for both Jew and Gentile, at Christ’s first advent, in these words: “I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant *of the people*, for a light *of the Gentiles*” (Is. 42:6). (The “people” refers to the Jewish people.)

The writer of Hebrews quoted the old prophecies of this New Covenant (Heb. 8:6-13) and specifically said that this much better covenant was already established in the first century (Heb. 8:6), and that the old one even then was decaying and getting old, and was ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:13). Not long after the writing of Hebrews, the temple rituals and sacrifices, the proudest features of the Old Covenant relationship, vanished completely as the city and temple were destroyed by the Romans.

Paul called the Old Covenant “the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones” (2 Cor. 3:7) and “the ministration of condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:9) but the New Covenant, he said, is “the ministration of the spirit” (2 Cor. 3:8) and “the ministration of righteousness” (2 Cor. 3:9), which “giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6). The glory of the Old Covenant, as once reflected in the face of Moses, “was to be done away” (2 Cor. 3:7) and was to be replaced by the New Covenant that would “exceed in glory” (2 Cor. 3:9).

That Paul had no doubt that the New Covenant had forever replaced the Old Covenant is clear from his conclusion: “For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious” (2 Cor. 3:11).

Since Calvary, and forever, the New Covenant is God’s *only* covenant with man. Its inauguration was announced by Christ on the night in which he was betrayed, when “he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament (covenant), which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt. 26:27,28). This covenant relationship with God, through the blood of Christ, is offered to as many as receive him (Jn. 1:12) prior to his second advent. It is the only hope of Jew and Gentile alike. “Whosoever believeth in him” (Jn. 3:16) shares in the eternal life that is the heritage of the spiritual or New Covenant Israel.

The great revelation of the New Covenant is that it has always been God’s plan to extend his covenant relationship to the whole world. Under the earlier covenant, the high priest went alone into the innermost part of the tabernacle where the ark was kept, thus signifying “that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest” (Heb. 9:8). At Calvary that was forever changed because “Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle. . . . by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (Heb. 9:11,12). When Jesus died, “behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” (Mt. 27:51), thereby signifying that the way into the holiest was open to all, Jew and Gentile alike, “by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh” (Heb. 10:20).

As James confirmed, the death and resurrection of Christ fulfilled the prophecy of Amos

9:11,12, and the “greater and more perfect tabernacle” was open to all the world.

As Paul confirmed (Rom. 9:25,26), the prophecy of Hosea was also fulfilled at Calvary; to the Gentiles who once were “not my people,” it now was said “ye are the sons of the living God” (Hos. 1:10, 2:23).

Numerous other Old Covenant prophecies were fulfilled, once and forever, when the New Covenant was established at the first advent of Christ. Some examples:

Genesis 3:15 — “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.”

Psalms 2:6,7 — “Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.”

Psalms 102:13 — “Thou shalt arise, and have mercy upon Zion: for the time to favour her, yea, the set time is come.”

Isaiah 9:7 — “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever.”

Isaiah 12:6 — “Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.”

Isaiah 35:8,9 — “And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there: but the redeemed shall walk there.”

Ezekiel 11:19,20 — “And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh: that they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

Daniel 2:44 — “And in the days of these kings (i.e., during the reign of the Roman empire) shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed.”

Micah 4:1,2 — “But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow into it. And 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; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion. and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

Zechariah 6:12,13 — “Behold the man whose name is the Branch. . . e ven he shall build the temple of the Lord; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne.”

Zechariah 13:1 — “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.”

To the above brief list could be added innumerable other promises from the law, the Psalms and the prophets but that would require the reproduction here of huge segments of the Old Testament and would deprive the reader of the joy of discovering those additional fulfillments for himself during his daily Bible study.

## **The Eternal Purpose**

In Part 2 of this book we presented some of the compelling New Testament proof that the

church is the new and spiritual Israel.

In Part 3 we described the rich inheritance that belongs to the church as the true Israel. We showed that believers, as the seed of Abraham, are the heirs of the world (Rom. 4:13), that the church alone is the holy nation of God (1 Pet. 2:9), that believers are reigning now with Christ in his kingdom, far above every other power (Eph. 1:21, 2:6), and that the church is the present-day fulfillment of the old Hebrew prophecies that refer to the land, the city, the temple and the chosen people of God.

One further area of investigation remains. On more than one occasion, starting with the introduction, this book has referred to the unique and strategic position occupied by spiritual Israel in this twentieth century. It is only fair, therefore, for the reader to ask: What is the key role that these chosen people of God are to play in this crooked and perverse generation? What is that great eternal purpose that God is accomplishing through the body of believers drawn from every nation, kindred, people and tongue?

Paul gave us the answer to that question. He said that God has created the one worldwide body of believers in order “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might *now* be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places...according to the eternal purpose which he has realized through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:10,11—RSV).

Wisdom is highly spoken of in the scriptures. It is “the principal thing” (Prov. 4:7). “It is better than rubies, and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared with it” (Prov. 8:11). “The foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1 Cor. 1:25) and the wisdom of God, nay, the *manifold* wisdom of God, is as much above the wisdom of men as “the heavens are higher than the earth” (Is. 55:9).

That is why it is so remarkable that the Bible teaches that the manifold wisdom of God is being demonstrated to principalities and powers through the church! And *only* through the church.

Believers are generally aware, or should be, that the manifold wisdom of God was demonstrated at Calvary where the Son of God “spoiled principalities and powers” and “made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15). Many are less aware, however, that *since Calvary God has continued to demonstrate his manifold wisdom through the church.*

Because of God’s great eternal love for his Son he has desired many more sons like Jesus. Today, as in every generation since Calvary, God is “bringing many sons unto glory” (Heb. 2:10). He seeks a community of men and women who are “conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29).

That kind of conformation usually requires a lot of work. God has chosen to put his “treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7) that are “sanctified, and meet for the master’s use” (2 Tim. 2:21) but to make us fit for his use we typically require a rather extensive change of image. So God holds up before us the image of his Son, and “we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18).

God changes us by taking from us those traits of character that are not part of the image and glory of God, and by replacing them with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22,23) and the other qualities manifested in the life of Christ.

The things in our lives that are not part of the image of Christ must be dealt with one by one. Open sin, of course, must go. But many other un-Christlike characteristics must also be dealt with. If our bad temper makes us snap and bark at people, God shows us that failing, and we must take it to Calvary, repent of it there, and let Christ’s disposition take its place. As we let

God arise within us, then one by one his enemies are scattered (Ps. 68:1), and the Son shines forth from us ever brighter.

God wants a people whose daily lives will display to the world the life that is in God. Old Testament Israel failed to do that, as any natural people must fail, but Jesus succeeded. When Christ walked the earth nineteen centuries ago in the body of Jesus of Nazareth, the world could look at that one man and say, "That's what God is like." Today, the world should be able to say the same thing when it looks at that "one new man" (Eph. 2:15), the corporate body of Christ.

It is through that redeemed community which shines with the image of Christ that God accomplishes his purpose. Whether we see it or not, whether we believe it or not, the word of God says that the church *now* is demonstrating God's manifold wisdom to principalities and powers. And that demonstration is the cause of great consternation and concern among "the rulers of the darkness of this world" and the "spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12).

The principalities and powers are in a spiritual uproar because they cannot understand how certain men and women can inflict upon them repeated and humiliating defeats that are all too reminiscent of that day at Calvary when Christ spoiled and wasted them. They cannot understand how other people can be such easy prey for their nets of darkness and wickedness while this one body of people escapes their snares and sits down together with Christ "far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:21).

God shows his manifold wisdom by taking men and women who were created "a little lower than the angels" (Heb. 2:7) and making them "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). He shows his wisdom by taking those born with the image of Adam and giving them a second birth through which they become capable of acquiring the heavenly image of Christ (1 Cor. 15:47-49). He shows his wisdom by taking creatures made from the dust of the earth and raising them to the highest heavens, to the bitter consternation of principalities and powers who cannot believe that dust could turn out so well.

No wonder the demons tremble (Jas. 2:19)!

No wonder the angels desire to look into these things (1 Pet. 1:12)!

What is it about these people that leaves principalities and powers dumbstruck? Nothing less than that greatest miracle of all time and eternity: "the gift of God (which) is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

Although believers share with other people the same gift of natural life that God as Creator has bestowed upon all humanity, they also have the gift of spiritual life that God as Redeemer bestows only upon those who believe in Christ as Saviour.

That second life, the life that is spiritual and eternal, creates a difference between believers and others that is far more significant than we usually realize. Within the unbeliever there remains only the petulant cry for "my will" but from the one who receives Christ as Saviour and Lord there comes the heartfelt plea for "thy will." For the believer it is now "not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20). All the hopes and dreams of the old life-style should wither and die in the believer, and the better hope of the New Life-style should spring forth.

Eternal life through Christ makes the difference. Eternal life is the gift of God to "deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:15). Eternal life is not subject to the risk of sudden termination that limits both the quantity and the quality of natural life. Eternal life gives the believer a capacity for living far in excess of that of the unbeliever.

Having obtained through Christ the greatest and highest satisfaction that life on earth can offer, and faced only with the expectation of even greater joy through an eternity with the Lord (“to live is Christ, and to die is gain” — Phil. 1:21) the believer is free to “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Paul said he counted everything that the world offered as “loss” compared with “the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:8), and you can be sure there was despair among principalities and powers when our former Pharisee said *that*, and when he backed it up by cheerfully suffering the loss of all his former fleshly acclaim (Phil. 3:4-8).

If believers, following Paul’s example, commit themselves wholly to the Lord, he will use them to demonstrate his manifold wisdom to principalities and powers. But we must understand that he will use only the church, which is the body of Christ, for that eternal purpose. The principalities stand in awe only of God’s holy and spiritual nation. They are *not* impressed with natural nations, or their unsaved citizens, because, after all, “the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance” (Is. 40:15).

In Colossians 3:1,2, Paul said that if we “be risen with Christ” we should “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” He urges believers to “set your affection on things above” (that is, on spiritual things, which include the heavenly Jerusalem which is free) and “not on things on the earth” (including the earthly Jerusalem which is in bondage).

Where have you set your affection?

### **Singing in the Reign**

In concluding our story of the once and future Israel, it seems appropriate to use one of the remarkable Old Testament types to describe the people through whom God is demonstrating his manifold wisdom.

In the time of Moses, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt in order that he might bring them into the promised land. In a greater, spiritual way he does the same with the church. He sets us free from the bondage of the world, leads us through a wilderness time of testing and trials, and brings us into that promised land of the “heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6).

The problem is that there were giants in the promised land of Canaan (Num. 13:33) and there are also giants in the spiritual realm in which Christians move. Paul said “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12).

If that frightens you, just relax and look a little deeper into the Old Testament type.

When word of the giants spread among the Israelites, most of the people wanted to return to Egypt (Num. 14:1-4). But Joshua and Caleb spoke these words (to *us*): “The land . . . is an exceeding good land. If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. Only rebel not against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us; *their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not*” (Num. 14:6-9).

The “many sons” that God is bringing into the glory of the spiritual promised land are like Joshua and Caleb. They know the giants are there, those spiritual powers of wickedness that conspire against the will of God and the well-being of man, but they “fear them not” because “their defence is departed from them.” Christ took away their defence at Calvary when he

“spoiled principalities and powers . . . and made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15). And also because of Calvary, believers are equipped with “the whole armour of God” (Eph. 6:10-18), an incredible array of weapons designed to make their victory certain.

Non-believers are not armed for spiritual warfare. Having ignored or rejected the claims of Christ upon their lives, they have no spiritual weapons, and can only attempt to battle “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2) with such totally inadequate natural weapons as “intelligence” or “education” or “will power.” It is an uneven contest, and they are quickly brought into submission. These are the bond-slaves of Egypt whose lives are bitter with hard bondage (Ex. 1:14), and who “walk in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart” (Eph. 4:17,18).

But while unbelievers are subjugated to the hosts of Pharaoh “in all manner of service” (Ex. 1:14), believers are singing in the reign. Because they share in the victory at Calvary that brought Christ all power in heaven and earth, they are seated with him in heavenly places, and they “reign in life” (Rom. 5:17), far above the spiritual powers that once held them in their sway.

Singing in the reign? Yes, believers sing because they are the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy that the people of the Lord “shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord . . . and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all” (Jer. 31:12).

They sing because they are the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that God’s chosen people would “sing unto the Lord; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth” (Is. 12:5).

They “sing unto the Lord a new song; for he hath done marvelous things: his right hand, and his holy arm, hath gotten him the victory” (Ps. 98:1).

They sing in joyful obedience to the prophet’s admonition to “sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the Lord” (Zech. 2:10).

Believers sing “the songs of Zion” (Ps. 137:3) because they alone are:

“The children of promise” (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 4:28).

“Abraham’s seed” (Gal. 3:29).

“Heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

“The Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

“The circumcision” (Phil. 3:3).

“The elect of God” (Col. 3:12).

“A people of his own” (Ti. 2:14 — RSV).

“The people of God” (Heb. 4:9).

“A chosen generation” (1 Pet. 2:9).

“An holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9).

“A peculiar people” (1 Pet. 2:9).

“A royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9).

“Kings and priests unto God” (Rev. 1:6).

“Heirs of the kingdom” (Jas. 2:5).

“The city of the living God” (Heb. 12:22).

“Mount Zion” (Heb. 12:22).

“The holy city” (Rev. 21:2).

“The temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16).

Believers sing because spiritual Israel blossoms and buds and fills the face of the world with fruit (Is. 27:6).

They sing because in the former deserts of their lives a stream of living water has sprung forth and now they blossom as the rose (Is. 35:1-7).

They sing because the Lord comforts all the waste places of Zion, turning wildernesses into Edens, and deserts into gardens of the Lord (Is. 51:3).

Today spiritual Israel stands as a city upon a hill, which cannot be hid (Mt. 5:14). As the body of Christ, the fullness of him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:23), it is truly the only light in a world that loves darkness rather than light (Jn. 3:19).

The people of spiritual Israel are the people whose lives must stand as an indictment of the crooked and perverse lives around them. They are the people who walk in the footsteps of the One who “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

They are the people who confound the powers of wickedness because they testify that “although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab. 3:17,18).

What can the people of the world do when faced with countless millions of men, women and children who love not their lives unto the death (Rev. 12:11) but who honor Christ and love the brotherhood of believers?

What can they do when confronted with people who reign far above the pain and tragedy of life, who “take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake” (2 Cor. 12:10)?

Only one of two things.

They can persecute and kill the believers, thereby adding immeasurable further gains to their already incomparable wealth.

Or, overwhelmed by the grace and wisdom of God, they can bow the knee and confess the Lordship of Christ, and themselves become part of that great and holy nation of spiritual Israel.