

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES

A Comprehensive View of God's Great Plan from
Eternity to Eternity Illustrated with Chart

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE TWO COVENANTS

In this series of studies we have come to that period of the world's history which we call the Age of Law. According to our chart it extends from Abraham to Christ.

This period is usually divided into two ages: The Age of Promise, from Abraham to Sinai; and the Age of Law, from Sinai to Christ. For our purpose here, however, we have chosen to call the period of time from Abraham to Sinai a preface to the Law of Moses.

Today, with this thought in mind, we want to compare the two covenants given by God to man during this period:

- (1) His covenant with Abraham; and
- (2) His covenant with Israel at Sinai.

Then in our next lesson we shall amplify the message of the two covenants, dealing particularly with the Law of Moses.

We have seen how God in Old Testament times passed man through different testings or trials or administrations, in order to prove to man his need of a Savior. We have seen that man innocent failed; man under conscience failed; man under human government failed; and each time God had to judge man's sin and give him a new beginning.

Today, as we contrast the two covenants, we shall see this same principle set forth:

- (1) God wants to deal with man in grace; and
- (2) man, left to his own efforts, rejecting the grace of God, is utterly helpless, unable to save himself from the ruin brought into the world by sin.

In other words, failure is written over every effort of fallen man to make himself fit for the presence of a holy God.

And as, side by side with the dark picture of sin, we have seen the promise of a Redeemer, so also in the two covenants we shall see man's failure and God's deliverance.

This, therefore, is the purpose of the two covenants:

- (1) To show what is in the heart of God, as seen in His covenant with Abraham, a covenant wholly of grace; and
- (2) To show what is in the heart of man, as seen in the covenant He made with Israel at Sinai when man asked for a covenant of works.

God's Covenant With Abraham — One of Sovereign Grace

From Genesis 12 to Exodus 18 we read the story of God's dealings with Abraham and his descendants in sovereign grace. In these chapters we find the record of the Abrahamic Covenant; whereas, in Exodus 19 to Malachi, even unto Calvary's Cross, we see Israel in that covenant relationship with God which began at Sinai.

The first of these two covenants was an unconditional covenant; the second, a conditional covenant, a covenant of works, later proven to be a covenant with death.

God's sovereign grace is seen in His words spoken to Abraham when He called him out of idolatry (Joshua 24:2) and made him the father of the Hebrew nation; for **“the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew 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”** (Genesis 12:1-3).

Notice here God's sovereign declaration: **“I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee.”**

It was not Abraham's merit that obtained for him the promises; it was God's sovereign grace.

On the contrary, the covenant under which Israel entered the land of Canaan under Joshua was a covenant of works; the condition of blessing was Israel's obedience to the law. And did they hold the land? No. Likewise, God made a conditional covenant with King Saul, on the ground of his obedience; and Saul failed to keep his part of the covenant. Always promises given by God to man on condition of man's obedience are never attained; or if attained for a time, they are never retained. Why? Because man cannot keep his part of the covenant.

But thank God! Our salvation depends on the unconditional covenant of the grace of God! Like the covenant He made with Abraham, its promise is sure, because it depends upon the absolute “I will” of a sovereign God. It can never fail, because it is dependent upon the faithfulness of the God of grace!

The covenant at Sinai should never have been made; but Israel presumptuously asked for it; and God granted it, in order to show the sin and iniquity and unrighteousness of the human heart. He granted it, that the law might serve as “a schoolmaster” to bring sinners “unto Christ.”

But before He permitted this covenant to be made, He gave to Abraham, out of His sovereign grace, the unconditional covenant that ever pointed on to Christ and His atoning work on Calvary.

Why Did God Call Abraham?

Perhaps God's grace in His relationship with Abraham will be seen more clearly as we ask ourselves this question: Why did God call Abraham out of idolatry, reveal Himself unto him, and make him the father of the Hebrew nation?

The answer is four-fold:

1. To show the utter ruin and sin and guilt of the human race and therefore the need of a Savior.

God placed Abraham, the best of men, in a most favorable environment. He gave to him and his descendants a fruitful land, and put a hedge about them, as it were, separating them from the heathen nations and the things that defile. But Israel failed. They worshipped idols; they practiced all manner of wickedness; they crucified their Messiah!

2. Why did God call Abraham? To place in the world a depository for His truth: His Word — “the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1, 2).

Written by “**holy men of God**” — Israelites — as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit, these oracles of God have gone into all the world to bless all nations.

3. Why did God call Abraham? To make the Hebrew nation a channel for the coming of Christ, the Redeemer.

To Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob He said: “**In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed**” (Genesis 12:3; 26:4; 28:14).

And Paul, centuries later, wrote these significant words: “**God . . . preached . . . the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed**” (Galatians 3:8).

Let me ask you, my friend, what is the Gospel? It is the “*good news*” of a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. And Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are in heaven today because they believed God's covenant of grace, and put their faith in the coming Redeemer.

The Lord Himself said to the Pharisees when He was upon earth, “**Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad**” (John 8:56).

4. Why did God call Abraham? To put into the world a people who should be a national witness to Himself.

Through leaders like Moses and Joshua and the prophets; through His own presence in the midst in the Shekinah Glory; through His providence and power He was giving an object lesson to the world.

A most favored nation, separated from deteriorating influences, with a perfect code of earthly laws to regulate living, with instruction even about the kind of food to eat, disease, social relationships — with all these blessings, Israel failed more grievously than did man under conscience and human government, even crucifying the Lord from heaven!

God's call of Abraham and His covenant with him sprang from the unconditional, sovereign grace that is ever in the heart of God. Abraham had done nothing to merit such mercy. It all came from God's heart of love!

Sacrifice — The Ground of Blessing

Moreover, the ground of all this blessing which God bestowed upon Abraham was sacrifice, a type of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Turn to the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, and read the record carefully. Abraham, acknowledging himself to be a needy soul, takes the place of an unrighteous sinner, and goes to God with his need.

“What wilt thou give me?” he asks.

He does not claim any merit of his own; he asks for a gift of pure grace. Then it is that God points him to the stars and confirms His unconditional covenant regarding Abraham's seed and Abraham's land. That land is Palestine; and that **“seed”** is Christ. (See Galatians 3:16; compare also the entire message of Paul to the Galatians).

Again Abraham turns to God and asks: **“Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit”** the land, with all the accompanying blessings promised? (Genesis 15:8).

Then it is that God shows him that the altar of sacrifice is the ground of all blessing; the shed blood is the basis of His covenant of grace. And that altar foreshadowed the cross of the Lord Jesus — the only ground of blessing for a lost and ruined people.

Every detail of this scene is significant; and the picture is wonderfully complete.

- The **“heifer”** speaks to us of the vigor of the Son of God;
- The **“goat,”** of the sin-offering;
- The **“ram,”** of consecration;
- The **“turtledove”** and **“young pigeon,”** of His heavenly nature.

- The thrice repeated “**three years**” remind us of the three years of public ministry of the Lord Jesus.
- The “**fowls**” represent the powers of hell, trying to put doubt and fear into Abraham's heart. (Compare Christ's own statement that the birds of the air snatched away the good seed, Matthew 13:4). But by faith “**Abraham drove them away.**”

“**And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham; and, lo, an horror of a great darkness**” (verse 12).

- The “**deep sleep**” suggests that Abraham was not to inherit the promises of the covenant during his natural life;
- The “**horror of great darkness**” represents the grave;
- While the awakening out of the “**deep sleep**” points on to the resurrection hope, that day when Abraham with the children of promise shall enter into the millennial reign of Christ.
- Verses 13 and 14 are prophetic of the Egyptian bondage, now a fact of history.
- The time of affliction in Egypt was but a shadow of “**the great tribulation,**” “**the time of Jacob's trouble.**”

“**And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces**” on the altar (verse 17).

The “**smoking furnace**” but faintly speaks of the great tribulation through which Israel is yet to pass; but the “**burning lamp**” accompanied the smoking furnace!

So also God will be with His people to deliver them out of their time of sorrow, to see that the nation is not annihilated. Christ, the Light of the world, is ever “**in the midst**” of His people.

“**In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram**” (verse 18) — a covenant based upon death. And then God said, not, “*Unto thy seed, will I give this land*” as in Genesis 12:7, but, “**Unto thy seed have I given this land.**”

All the promises of the covenant are based upon the finished work of Christ, foreshadowed by the sacrifice offered upon the altar.

My brother, even as God pointed Abraham to the stars, so also He points you to the heavens; He points you to the stars; He offers you pardon from sin and promise of eternal blessings — on the basis of the death of His only begotten Son.

Will you follow the example of Abraham, and take Him as your Saviour? “**Abraham believed in the Lord**” (Genesis 15:6).

It is not written that Abraham believed God and worked for his salvation. “**Abraham believed in the Lord; and he counted it (his faith) to him for righteousness.**”

When you approach God as a helpless sinner, asking, “**What wilt thou give me?**” then God offers, without money and without price, the gift of eternal salvation through faith in His pardoning grace. “**Whereby shall I know?**” you ask again. And God's answer is: “Jesus paid it all!” He paid the penalty for your sins when He bore them on Calvary's Cross. There can be no blessing apart from the altar of His sacrifice.

When Abraham “**believed in the Lord**” and His covenant of grace, Satan tried to put doubts and fears into his mind; “**the fowls came down**” to consume the sacrifice. But by the grace of God “**Abram drove them away**”!

When you accept God's provision of unconditional grace, Satan will try to put doubts and fears into your mind. He will try to lead you to believe that your salvation depends upon your own good works, at least in part. But by the grace of God you, like Abram, may drive away all doubt and fear.

Fix your eye upon Calvary; and you will hear God's reassuring voice, speaking to you, even as He spoke to Abram, saying: “**Fear not . . . I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward**” (Genesis 15:1).

The Two Covenants Contrasted

This is the message of God's covenant of grace made with Abraham. In our next lesson we shall see how striking the contrast is between it and the covenant made at Mount Sinai. Today we shall look only at the high points of difference between the two. It is very important that we distinguish that difference carefully; for much confusion exists in the minds of God's people regarding the issues involved. Perhaps the following contrast in outline will help us to grasp more fully the meaning of God's unconditional grace offered to Abraham and to a sinning world:

The Abrahamic Covenant

1. Made with Abraham 430 years before Sinai; and not disannulled at Sinai (Galatians 3:17).
2. Concerns Israel and Israel's land primarily, but points also to “**the spiritual**” descendants of Abraham; i. e., the church.
3. Unconditional blessing.
4. A covenant of grace.
5. A covenant unto life.
6. Guarantees Israel's future and the reestablishment of Abraham's seed in Abraham's land.

The Sinaitic Covenant

1. Made with Israel at Mt. Sinai to reveal the “**exceeding sinfulness of sin**” (Romans 7:13).
2. Concerns Israel and Israel's land only.
3. Conditional blessing — dependent upon Israel's obedience to God.
4. A covenant of works.
5. “**The ministration of death**” (II Corinthians 3:7).
6. Accounts for the state of dispersed Israel today, because the covenant made at Sinai depended on Israel's obedience to the law which they disobeyed.

Volumes have been written on the foregoing fundamental truths; the epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Galatians deal particularly with this subject; but space forbids our going into full detail here.

As already stated, our next lesson will amplify this theme and explain more fully about the Sinaitic Covenant, called "**The Law of Moses.**"

Then we shall see the difference between such questions as the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day. But before we go further into these matters, let us get clearly in mind another significant contrast that we must if we are to grasp the meaning of the two covenants. And that distinction concerns Abraham's earthly seed and his heavenly seed.

Abraham's Earthly and Heavenly Seed

We have already seen that, even as "**the seed of woman**" in Genesis 3:15 pointed to the virgin birth of Christ, so also "**the seed**" of Abraham is Christ, in whom all the nations of the earth have been blessed. This truth is fundamental.

In another sense "**Abraham's seed**" refers to the nation of Israel; and in yet another sense the expression refers to the children of "**the household of faith,**" the spiritual seed of Abraham.

This is the message of the books of Romans and Galatians. "**In Christ Jesus . . . there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise**" (Galatians 3:29).

Abraham's Earthly Seed

1. Israel.
2. An earthly people.
3. Symbolized by "**the sands of the sea**" for number. (See Genesis 22:17).
4. An earthly inheritance, the land of Palestine.
5. Assured of the future and their re-establishment in Palestine.
6. Jerusalem, an earthly city.
7. All of grace!

Abraham's Spiritual Seed

1. The church composed of Jew and Gentile.
2. A heavenly people.
3. Symbolized by "**the stars of the heaven.**"
4. A heavenly inheritance, "**a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God**" (Hebrews 11:10).
5. Assured of heaven and eternity with Christ.
6. The New Jerusalem, a heavenly home.
7. All of grace!

Many Christians today would return to Sinai. They would put upon the church the yoke of bondage, the Law of Moses. But do you not see, my friend, that God can deal with sinful man only on the ground of grace?

Thus He dealt with Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation and the father of the faithful in this church age.

Four hundred and thirty years later Israel, in blindness and pride and self-righteousness, presumed to ask for the law; and God granted their request, to show them that they could not keep His law, to show them their sin in the light of His holy law, to show them that only by faith in the only One who could keep that law can the guilty sinner find grace.

But remember! When God permitted Israel to have the law, He did not set aside His covenant with Abraham! He did not disannul that unconditional covenant of grace!

If you are trying to get to heaven partly by grace and partly by the works of the law, then you will not get anything on that basis.

“By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

My brother, even your faith is the gift of God! Will you accept His gift, and be counted among Abraham's heavenly seed?

The Abrahamic Covenant Assures Israel's Future

Now God's covenant with Abraham has been partly fulfilled, in that Christ has come to die for the sins of the world; and through Christ and the Bible all nations of the earth have been blessed. But this covenant will yet be fulfilled in its entirety when Israel has been re-established in the land of Palestine.

According to the covenant made at Sinai, Israel was promised blessing if she obeyed the law; cursing if she broke it. God led the nation into the land of promise under Joshua. But Israel failed; they broke the law for which they had asked; they crucified their Messiah who alone fulfilled the law; and the curse of that law fell upon them.

As a result they have long been scattered among the nations; the name “Jew” has become a byword; they have been persecuted, hated, distressed.

But Israel will yet possess the land on the ground of God's covenant of grace made with Abraham 430 years before the law was given.

In spite of Israel's pride and self-righteousness and unbelief, they will yet have a glorious future because of God's sovereign **“I will.”**

“Coming events cast their shadows”; and in the Zionist Movement today we see the prophecies of the Scriptures being fulfilled. We see Israel turning her face toward Jerusalem. God is working out His great purpose for His chosen people, but not on the ground of the law; it is all of grace, and had its beginning in His unconditional covenant with Abraham.

On the pages of the Old Testament, hundreds of texts bearing upon this theme crowd into view. We shall select from these some which prove that God will yet fulfill His covenant with Abraham in every detail:

1. Israel will be regathered in the land of Palestine.

Turn to Ezekiel 37:1-4. Here we see the picture of the national resurrection of Israel from the “**graves**”; that is, from the Gentile nations where they have long been buried, as it were.

Read Ezekiel 37:21, where God says: “**Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen [nations], whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land.**” Read also the eleventh chapter of Isaiah; Isaiah 14:1, Jeremiah 16:14, 15.

In Jeremiah 30:11 we read that Israel dispersed among the nations is now under the disciplining hand of God; but in Jeremiah 32:41 we see further that God said: “**I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and with my whole soul.**”

Israel will be regathered on the basis of God's covenant with Abraham, in spite of the fact that centuries later they asked for and received a law which they could not keep.

2. Israel will be reconciled to God by the acceptance of Christ as their Messiah.

Read the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of Zechariah. Words such as these are unmistakable:

“**I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his first born**” (Zechariah 12:10).

Again, we read in Zechariah 14:4 that “**his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives.**”

Israel will behold their King and be reconciled to Him — because God will keep the covenant He made with Abraham!

*3. Israel will become a “**praise and fame in every land where they have been put to shame**” (Zephaniah 3:19).*

Look carefully at the entire passage from which these striking words are taken (Zephaniah 3:14-20).

In that day the Lord will be in their midst (verse 17); “**he will save, he will rejoice**” over His people “**with joy.**”

What a wonderful future is in store for Israel! This cannot be said of Israel today because they are out of the land of promise. Today their name is a byword. But when the Lord regathers His people, then He will make them “**a name and a praise among all people of the earth**” — because He will keep His covenant with Abraham!

4. Israel will occupy the religious leadership of the world, not because they are worthy, but because God will keep His covenant with Abraham.

What a beautiful picture we see in Zechariah 8:2-8, the Lord in the midst of His people.

In that day **“it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you”** (Zechariah 8:23).

Then God's covenant with Abraham will be completely fulfilled, in that **“all nations of the earth shall be blessed”** — not only by Christ, the Redeemer of the world, but also by His people Israel who shall be witnesses unto Him in every truth.

5. Jerusalem will be a city of righteousness and the metropolis of the world.

Listen to the Word of the Lord: **“I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city”** (Isaiah 1:26).

And listen yet again to the Word of the Lord God: **“There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for every age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof”** (Zechariah 8:4, 5).

Even the wild beasts of the field will be no longer ferocious, **“and a little child shall lead them”** (Isaiah 11:6).

In that day the Son of Abraham, the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, will sit upon His throne, as King of kings and Lord of lords.

To Peter He said when He was upon earth: **“Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”** (Matthew 19:28).

Here Christ was talking of the twelve tribes of Israel, Abraham's earthly seed; for, as we shall see later in our studies, before Christ comes to sit upon the throne of His glory, Abraham's heavenly seed, the church which is His bride, will be with Him. Abraham's heavenly seed will rule and reign with Him as **“heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.”**

In our lesson today, however, we are thinking of the time of Israel's future glory, when their King shall rule **“from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth”** (Psalm 72:8).

We are thinking of that time when Jerusalem will be a city of righteousness and the metropolis of the world — because God will not forget His covenant with Abraham!

“Abraham Believed In The Lord”

“Abraham believed in the Lord; and he counted it unto him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

Abraham looked down the centuries and saw the **“day”** of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary; he saw it and **“was glad.”** And because he put his faith in the shed blood of the coming Redeemer, God reckoned his faith unto him for righteousness.

My unsaved brother, even as Abraham looked forward to the cross of Christ and was saved, so also you must look back to Calvary if you are to inherit eternal life. There is no other way to God except on the ground of sacrifice, the shed blood of the only Saviour from sin. There is no other way to God except on His own terms — unconditional grace.

Do not let anyone put upon you the yoke of bondage.

You cannot keep the Law of Moses.

No man has ever kept it but the holy Son of Man who kept it because He was and is God, who kept it for lost sinners who have ever been and always shall be unable to keep it for themselves. Look unto Him; trust Him for His grace; and accept the free gift He offers you — everlasting life.

Abraham believed God for what He was going to do. You are called to believe Him for what He has already done. **“By faith Abraham . . . looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”** (Hebrews 11:8-10).

By faith you may set your face toward the New Jerusalem and, as Abraham's heavenly seed, inherit the riches of Christ for all the endless ages. Will you take God at His Word? His promise is sure — and it is all of grace, unconditional grace!

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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