

January - March 2024

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## Part 3

*“And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him: Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? For the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech Thee, O Lord, we beseech Thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for Thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased Thee.” (Jonah 1:7-14)*

So great was the storm, that these heathen mariners were convinced someone had aroused the anger of a ‘sea-god’ – for this was no ordinary tempest. Consulting with one another, they concluded that lots must be cast in order to discover the culprit. Who on board could be guilty of stirring up such fury from the gods? Remember that these were pagan and idolatrous men. By this time, Jonah was well awake and fully aware of what was going on – he would not otherwise have been able to document these details. The backslidden prophet knew full-well that this storm was sent by God as a judgment, and that he was the cause of it – but at this point he was still not prepared to confess, despite that fact that his shipmates had been put to great physical strain and mental anguish – to say nothing of the loss incurred by jettisoning the cargo.

The lots are duly cast. In this matter Jonah remained silent, perhaps thinking that the odds were favourable. There being a reasonable number of people on board, it seemed unlikely that the lot would fall on him. In this, Jonah's thinking was little better than that of the pagan sailors. Those words were true of him, and he was: "*holden with the cords of his sins*" (Proverbs 5:22). Jonah took a 'chance'. He gambled – but he lost. It was the case that: "*The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord*" (Proverbs 16:33). A sovereign God was overseeing and ordering all things, "*and the lot fell upon Jonah*" (v. 7).

*"Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?"* (v. 8). No doubt the interrogation was more detailed and involved, but Jonah gives the gist of it. The desperate mariners demanded an honest and satisfactory explanation, to account for their peril. "*And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land*" (v. 9). Jonah needs only describe his identity as a Hebrew, and his nationality, country of origin, and religion are at once disclosed. He continued with a profession of his faith in the one true and living God. This confession staggered the sailors; indeed it frightened them. They had arranged the lottery, and it had fallen on this particular man. Now they learn he is a Jew; belonging to that chosen people; and whose God, by his own admission, had power over both the sea (in which they were likely to perish) and the land (the safety of which they vainly sought).

*"Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him. Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them"* (v. 10). This verse indicates that more detail had been included in Jonah's answers than is recorded in vs. 8 – 9. At some point he had given his reason for taking ship as being a flight from the presence of the Lord. Little wonder that the men are perplexed. For Jonah to say in one breath that he fears God and His authority over the elements,

and in the next to admit to fleeing from Him, is beyond the ship's crew to comprehend. Jonah's confession of faith seemed only to aggravate his crime. To be a God-fearing Hebrew implied an acquaintance with the Law; Jonah would have been brought up and schooled in that which God required of him from his earliest days. Now to be running from God was an enigma to his heathen companions, defying even their faulty logic. "*Why hast thou done this?*" they ask. One commentator suggests this to be more of an exclamation than a question: 'why would you do such a thing?!' 'How could you act in such a way?!' The mariners express their amazement at the folly of a Hebrew seeking to escape from his own attested God.

Is there a spiritual lesson to be learned in this day and generation? There is – and it is this: the world knows what is expected of a Christian. What is more, although worldly men may never openly express it, they have a measure of respect for a Christian who lives a consistent life and walks in the paths of righteousness. If a professed believer has formerly walked uprightly, but subsequently falls into sin, and seems to deny their faith, there are even worldlings who will express surprise, or a degree of sorrow. When I was young, there was a man engaged in Christian work in the district where I was brought up. He was a most able preacher, and looked up to in that rural area, by Christians and non-Christians alike. Sad to say, he failed to withstand the attacks of the Adversary, and fell into moral sin – by which his life was blighted, his testimony ruined, and he never preached again. True, he later in humility repented, but a lasting blot remained. There were neighbours heard to say, 'what a pity about Mr \_\_\_\_\_'; 'we liked him', 'we respected him', 'whatever made him do it?!' What a tragedy it is when a Christian stumbles and falls, especially in so public a way. Some verses of a hymn express it well:

"Christian walk carefully: danger is near!  
On in thy journey with trembling and fear;  
Snares from without, and temptations within  
Seek to entice thee once more into sin.

Christian walk prayerfully: oft wilt thou fall  
If thou forget on thy Saviour to call;  
Safe thou shalt walk through each trial and care,  
If thou art clad in the armour of prayer.”

Jonah had strayed far from the path of holiness and duty; yea he was actually fleeing from his God. ‘What a senseless thing for you to do’, say these heathen men. “*Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? For the sea wrought, and was tempestuous*” (v. 11). Although Jonah had frankly told them of his sin, the sea was still raging, and there was no let-up in the tempest. ‘What shall we do unto thee?’ ask the men. ‘It is now obvious that you are the cause of all this – the lot fell on you – now you have confessed; why should we all perish because of your faults?’ ‘On your own admission you are defying your own God – what are we to do with you?’ It is quite apparent that there was a measure of fear come upon these men, above that which the storm had caused. This Hebrew was a prophet of ‘the Lord, the God of heaven’; he may be an unfaithful prophet, but they now also feared his God. Their hesitation in laying hands upon the culprit – who, after all, had put their lives in such peril – is proof that a fear of the living God was restraining them. The storm was not abated one whit; it was raging as violently as ever. So they ask counsel of the man himself – a backslidden prophet, but a prophet nonetheless – ‘what shall we do’?

“*And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you*” (v. 12). A greater degree of repentance begins to be seen in Jonah. No longer shall these men be held in such suspense and anxiety with their very lives in jeopardy through his disobedience. He was now quite prepared to die in order that they might be spared. As a true prophet of Jehovah he exercised his office and commanded the sailors to cast him overboard, prophesying that the great wind would thereupon blow out, and the sea become calm. To all intents, this would mean certain death for Jonah, but to this he was resigned. No longer will he flee from the

presence of the Lord, but commit himself, spirit, soul and body, to God's perfect will. It is precious to see that, though he had sinned so grievously, he is still God's confiding child.

*“Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them”* (v. 13). The prophet's answer did not at all appeal to the mariners. Is there not another way out? They did not want to deprive this man of his life. Again – it was not so much Jonah, as Jonah's God that they were concerned about. He is the great Creator, they had learned, Maker of heaven, earth and sea, and therefore to be feared. So they made yet another attempt to break through the raging waves and tempestuous winds, and bring the ship to land: *“they rowed hard”*, states the Scripture.

Admiration is due to these men: they showed great character and principle, and did everything in their power to save both the vessel, and Jonah's life. A point must be made regarding the doctrine of 'Total Depravity'. It is right to stress that all men are lost in Adam; that there is no difference, for all have sinned (cf Romans 5:12). This is true spiritually, and describes the condition of man in his natural state, in the sight of God. However, the doctrine does not teach that all men are therefore born as heartless brutes. Indeed, many men and women who have never experienced salvation prove to be extremely charitable, considerate, helpful, exemplary in their conduct towards their fellow men – and the Lord's own people have benefitted greatly through their kindness. In these matters, the Christian ought to be most appreciative, and express gratitude to such people, and be mindful to thank God for providing these characters who – in His providence – are kindly disposed towards the saints. This said, it must be added that good works and noble deeds on the part of the unregenerate will never justify them before a holy God; it will never make of them a 'new creature', or fit them for heaven. *“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (cf John 3:3-15).

In the sovereign purposes of God, the sailors proved very considerate towards Jonah, when their natural reaction might easily have been the opposite. It is recorded in Scripture to their credit that they attempted every practical measure to bring the ship to safety – but they could not. The raging storm had to be quelled, and that was beyond their power to perform. Only He who brought about the storm could cause it to cease. Confronted with failure and defeat, the mariners had to take Jonah at his word – it was their only hope of survival. But even to the last moment, they were very reluctant.

*“Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech Thee, O Lord, we beseech Thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for Thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased Thee”* (v.14). This verse is clear proof of the way in which the Law of God is written upon the hearts of all men, from the beginning (cf Romans 2:14-15). Adam knew exactly what was required of him, and immediately he disobeyed, he hid himself. Cain murdered his brother and at once knew he had grievously sinned and his own life was forfeit. So the pattern goes on, and can be traced for two-and-half thousand years from Eden to Sinai, from Adam to Moses. The human race had existed for 25 centuries before God committed His Law to writing and gave it to Moses; even then it was in sole custody of the Jews – but is it to be understood that throughout that period of time, man had no yardstick; no governing principles by which to live; no guidelines how to act before his Maker, or his fellow-man? No – the Law which God inscribed upon tables of stone at Sinai had been inscribed upon the heart of Adam from the beginning – and its principles have been embedded deeply in every man since. Regardless of the fact that a person has never learned the Ten Commandments, they know that murder is wrong; they know that to steal or rob from their neighbour is wrong; they know that adultery is wrong. Although many deny it, or abuse their consciences, they are inwardly aware these things are not right.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> verse of the chapter is seen a group of men with an entirely pagan background, unlikely ever to have had the Decalogue read or explained to them, probably never having heard of its existence – yet they knew it was wrong to take human life, at risk of forfeiting their own. Faced with such a dilemma, they cried unto God whom they scarcely knew: “*We beseech Thee, O Lord, we beseech Thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood*”; ‘we do not want to do this, but seem to have no other option’, ‘O Lord, we plead, let us not be chargeable with shedding innocent blood, nor exact our own lives in penalty!’ To this is added the remarkable statement: “*for Thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased Thee.*” In the extraordinary circumstances through which they had passed, these heathen seafarers had glimpsed the truth of God’s sovereignty, and here made expression of His omnipotence, who even in this violent storm, with His unfaithful prophet at its centre, was outworking His providential purposes.

May the many lessons of this interesting narrative be of help and blessing to the reader.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

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“Jonah’s conduct in the storm is no less noble than his former conduct had been base. The burst of the tempest blew away all the fog from his mind, and he saw the stars again. His confession of faith; his calm conviction that he was the cause of the storm; his quiet, unhesitating command to throw him into the wild chaos foaming about the ship; his willing acceptance of death as the wages of his sin, all tell how true a saint he was in the depth of his soul. Sorrow and chastisement turn up the subsoil. If a man has any good in him, it generally comes to the top when he is afflicted and looks death in the face. If there is nothing but gravel beneath, it too will be brought up by the plough. There may be much selfish unfaithfulness overlying a real devoted heart.”

Alexander Maclaren (1826 – 1910)



## THE GOD OF HEAVEN, EARTH AND SEA

*“And the servants of the king of Syria said unto him, Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they . . . And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, **The Lord is God of the hills, but He is not God of the valleys**, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord.”* (1 Kings 20:23, 28)

**I.** The words [of the Syrians] may be used in a **cynical** sense. I refer to the spirit of those who imagine that the Christian religion has no real hold, and will win no real victories, apart from certain favouring facts, certain propitious agencies, helpful as the hills were to Israel. They think [Christianity] is the creature of environment, the product of place. Detach it from that environment, transplant it from that place, and its power and reality will vanish. You find a sneer of this kind on the lips of two classes: those who wish to break down religion as a faith, and those who wish to break it down as a practice. Or, to put it otherwise, you find it in those who would have you careless of **belief**, and those who would have you careless of **conduct**. [They say] ‘Let us descend from the highlands of prejudice, and take our stand on the lowlands of reason, the arena of impartial logic, the fields of honest and unfettered debate, and see what the issue will be’. ‘Your conception of God is a phantom of the mountains; bring it to the clear air and the dry light of the plains; test it by the rules of a sound philosophy; look at it with the eyes of an enlightened intelligence; and phantom-like, it will vanish away’. What is this but a reproduction of the words of the Syrians, expounded and applied as modern cynicism knows how: ‘the Lord is a God of the hills, and not a God of the valleys’?

So, too, with the other class I spoke of, those who endeavour to rob you of **character**. Sad that there should be such. And wherever they do exist, they speak and act with the same idea: that the religion they assail

is a matter of circumstance. 'It is to be explained', they tell us, 'by the oversight of watchful eyes, the rule of firm hands, the influences of the fear of punishment and the hope of reward, the discipline and attachments of home'. 'Yet, but let the life be cut loose from all this, away from a father's authority, away from a mother's solicitude, away from a minister's advice, away from the whole set of circumstances that make purity and probity, temperance and truthfulness, matters of everyday counsel and everyday practice, and see what its principles are worth'. 'The [Christian] may retain his character so long as he lives on the heights, but once let him join us on the plains, on the platform of a wider existence, amidst the elbow-room of a freer sphere, then he will yield, take his swing, and comport himself just like the rest of us'. Such is the assertion of the cynic, thinking religion the outcome of locality, and Providence the [product] of place.

**II.** Again, the words may be used in a **superstitious** sense. We are to speak of its falseness now when applied to religious worship, associated as that worship often is with certain fixed and unbending conditions that are hurtful to the health and hostile to the spontaneity of the [Christian] life. Of course, the tendency that I speak of finds its crowning type in the ritualist. As much as anyone, the ritualist attempts to limit God, tying the operations of His grace to given and definite places, given and definite agencies, given and definite channels. And yet the superstitious spirit may exist, the spirit that attaches undue importance to places, associations, and forms. Not, of course, that places and associations are without their value in worship. They have their own impressiveness, their own significance, their own power to stimulate and help. But when all has been said, we are not to set limits to God. He who is the God of the hills, with their majesty, their variety, and their poetic associations, is also the God of the valleys, with their tameness, monotone, and commonplace features. And when He keeps you down in the valleys, be sure He can meet you there, in the homeliest religious services, in the humblest religious fellowship; and not only there, but amidst the dullest and most prosaic routines of everyday worldly life, till the fireside, the

shop, the counting-room, the mart, become for those who wait and who watch for Him a very Bethel, a house of God, the gate of heaven.

III. These words may be taken as descriptive of a **worldly spirit** – a spirit of worldly compliance and worldly compromise. Passing at this point from the subject of God’s help and worship to the subject of God’s claims, we find a tendency that is just the opposite of the one we have now been speaking of. In that case the error was one of over-separation in religious matters; in this case the error is that of over-concession – concession to the time-spirit, concession to the place-spirit. ‘Your God is a God of the hills; He vanishes when the hills are left, and the valleys take their place’. How often does the cynic’s taunt find colour and excuse in the professing Christian’s conduct! Some people do speak and act as if the authority of God were a matter of locality, and as if the leaving of a locality meant the leaving, or at any rate, the lowering, of the authority. I take the case of professing Christians in their seasons of recreation – let us say during foreign travel. Do not some put off their home religion with the same regularity with which they put off their home broadcloth, and put on tourist religion with the same sense of release with which they put on their tourist tweeds?

The thought might be carried further. Is not this at the root of a good deal of the unrest that is otherwise puzzling to see? Children discontented in happy homes ... young men and young women discontented with evangelical ministries and a watchful and attentive Church fellowship, all [desirous] for change, where to the outward observation there does not seem much reason for change. How shall we explain it? Sometimes, I fear, in this very way: the atmosphere of restriction does not suit such. They want to be surrounded with a slacker personal oversight, a lower local tone. They want to break free from religious restraints; and in breaking free from religious restraints, they imagine they get quit of religious obligations. You do not get quit of them. Right is right, and wrong is wrong, whatsoever be the circumstances, whatsoever the customs, whatsoever the observation.

**IV.** These words, too, may be taken as descriptive of a **rationalising spirit**. Here we pass from God's help, worship, and claims to the subject of His truth. And what is the error to be noticed here? Just the error we have been endeavouring to trace all along: the error of those who set bounds to God. We believe, do we not, that the Gospel is universal. We believe that as it is universal in intention, it is universal in fitness. We believe that both in precept and in promise it is the power of God to everyone that believeth. But there are those who deny this. They deny it on the grounds of capacity; deny it on the grounds of race. And it is interesting to notice that this rationalising spirit we speak of, in limiting the adaptability of the Christian religion, limits it from two different standpoints, for two different reasons. Some object to the Christian faith as being **too elementary**, characterised by elementary conditions, suitable to an elementary stage. The God of the Christians, they say, may serve for the simple, the inexperienced, the emotional – women with their capacity of belief, children with their childish dreams. But He will not serve for others – the scientist with his love of truth, the artist with his love of beauty, the artisan with his love of independence. Others, again, speak of the Christian faith as something that is **too advanced**, at any rate for certain circumstances and certain classes. The God of the Christians, they say, may serve for the cultivated and progressive, those whose minds have been opened, and whose consciences have been trained. But He is altogether too exalted in His standard, too strict in His principles, and too exacting in His demands, for the common and unenlightened, the barbarous and embruted.

What is the notion of both classes but the notion of a limited God – a God, as some say, for the hills; a God, as others say, for the valleys; yet in each case a God that is less than universal, a God who is bounded in His presence, bounded in His power, and bounded in His claims? We hold by a higher ideal. We cling to a nobler and more inspiring faith. We believe that the God of the Bible is the God of the hills and the valleys alike, wheresoever His [light has dawned].

W. A. Gray (1846 – 1900)

# LONG SHADOWS

## 2. Covenant Theology (continued)

Concerning the ‘old covenants’, it is important to register these points, described in the Hebrew Epistle:

**They were faulty** (cf Hebrews 8:7-8) – not through any mistake on the part of God – for it is God Himself who ‘finds fault’, that is to say ‘highlights the deficiencies’ in them. They were established in order to demonstrate their own fundamental weaknesses.

**They have vanished away** (cf Hebrews 8:13). The places, peoples and systems that were essential for compliance with the old covenants have disappeared, and cannot be recovered. The fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, shortly after this Epistle was circulated, eradicated every last vestige.

**They were abrogated by God Himself.** “*He taketh away the first, that He may establish the second*” (Hebrews 10:9). It is no accident of history that these things are so: God Himself appointed it. In order that the new and eternal covenant should be more clearly seen, all the types and shadows, the pointers and precursors, have been dispelled by Him.

What function did the Old Covenants serve, while they lasted? For it is evident that God appointed covenants in past times, and that these covenants form a continuous thread through the Scriptures and the history of humanity. They all fulfilled a vital and instructive purpose, as with each successive covenant, God’s eternal purposes are shown, and further aspects of truth revealed – particularly in reference to:

### 1. The Weakness of Earthly Means

In each of the old covenants made by God with men, there was a state of blessedness described, and the means whereby it was to be obtained or secured. In each case, the method appeared relatively easy to attain or abide by, and humanity might gladly have accepted such terms. But in reality, those schemes proved impossible to uphold. For example, in the

unspoken covenant established with Adam, the conditions seem the simplest of all: he began in possession of the blessings, and needed only to maintain himself in that situation. Surely he, with all the advantages of unblemished manhood, would at least be able to retain the exalted status bestowed upon him? Alas, no. So far from being able to obtain blessings, mankind is incapable of keeping those he has. Earthly Eden is not a place or state to be desired. If a blessing is attended with any conditions, howsoever small, it is doomed to be lost.

The covenant made with Noah had the true worship of God as its basis: “*And Noah builded an altar unto the Lord . . . and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said . . .*” (Genesis 8:20-21), but the limitations of this system became quickly apparent. Noah, with a very restricted supply of sacrificial beasts must have been acutely aware of the fact that: “*Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering*” (Isaiah 40:16) – that God could never be adequately worshipped, or praised enough, either by Noah himself, his small family, or by succeeding generations of mankind.

In the situation with Abraham, two primary conditions seemed to apply, and could be called ‘practice’ and ‘pedigree’. First, the rewards spoken were contingent upon his obedience: “*he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him*” (Genesis 18:19); he was required to follow God’s directions, before he could receive the blessing (cf Genesis 22:16-17). The second condition, ‘thy seed after thee’, proved equally unobtainable. The mere production of offspring to be future inheritors might seem like a simple biological goal – but Abraham was told these terms long after he and his wife were past child-bearing. And when, taking matters into his own hands, he produced an illegitimate son, that child was disqualified. Abraham could no more generate his own successors, than persons outside of his family could make themselves his heirs. It was a flawed system.

Similar faults existed in the arrangements made at Sinai. Here, the legal code far exceeded anything previously declared to Adam or Abraham. The rewards arising from a full conformity to that Law were undeniable, but the conditions were manifestly unachievable. The fact that so many systems existed for dealing with transgressions and sins, proved that perfect righteousness was impossible to attain. It might have seemed a great advantage to belong to the nation of Israel, to whom this Levitical economy was given; but the Law came with its penalties as well as its precepts – its curses as well as its blessings. Even if one were to be born, or become, a member of that nation, there was no likelihood (much less a guarantee) of whole-nation conformity – and unless all simultaneously obeyed, all collectively suffered. David lists the criteria laid upon him and his dynasty (2 Samuel 23:3-4), but death, degeneracy, division and final destruction put paid to any hopes of blessing by these means. Who would desire a covenant upon such impossible terms as these?

## **2. The Inability of Mortal Man**

The persons with whom God made His old covenants seem the most ideal, each made and appointed by Him: the primordial human being, the last righteous man in the world (cf Genesis 7:1), the first patriarch, a chosen nation, the greatest of kings (cf Acts 13:22). Had the selection process been committed to us, we could not have identified better candidates. Yet in every case they are seen to fail. Adam is cast out of Eden in disgrace; within four verses of the covenant declaration Noah is drunk in his tent (cf Genesis 9:21); Abraham arrives in Canaan only to quit it immediately for Egypt, with dire consequences; Israel is seen breaking the Law even as it is being transmitted, and the tables of stone are symbolically shattered before they can be read; while David's sin precipitated a coup, a succession crisis, and in two generations, civil war. Reflecting upon the terms of God's covenant with him, he was obliged to ask rhetorically: 'is this the manner of man?' and to admit: 'my house is not so with God' (cf 2 Samuel 7:19, 23:5). It was something of an understatement. To quote an old adage: "The best of men are only men at their best" – but all too often, they are at their worst. Who would desire a covenant reliant upon the compliance of fallible, mortal, man?

### 3. The Fragility of Earthly Blessings

An honest and objective reader of Bible history must conclude that the rewards contained within the old covenants were ultimately not realised. The conditions were unobtainable, and the human parties were weak, so the blessings must inevitably be forfeited. The paradise of Eden was barred against re-entry, and overrun with thorns and thistles. The number of Abraham's children was constantly eroded by their own mortality. Though the forbearance of God permitted his descendants to occupy Canaan for over a millennium, the blessings described to Abraham, Moses and David were finally withdrawn, as Babylonian and Roman invasions terminated both the royal line, and the nation. Even the benefits spoken of to Noah are not entirely secure: universal judgment has been deferred, but not revoked (cf 2 Peter 3:5-7); while the barren, inhospitable regions of this planet show the limitations of the temporal promises (cf Genesis 8:22). Who would desire a covenant which promised only 'treasures on earth', where moth, rust, thief, and corruption can steal the blessings away (cf Matthew 6:19)?

Speaking of the **supremacy of the New and Eternal Covenant**, the Hebrew epistle makes frequent use of the superlative 'better' to emphasise its excellencies. It is a "*better testament*" (Hebrews 7:22), having the Lord Jesus as its Mediator; it is an altogether "*better covenant*", founded on preferable conditions or "*better promises*" (Hebrews 8:6), and thus constitutes a "*better hope*" (Hebrews 7:19), holding forth the prospect of "*better things*", in a "*better country*"; namely a "*better and enduring substance*" in heaven (Hebrews 11:40, 16, 10:34). But the Apostle's declarations are not without precedent, because already in the Old Covenants, these aspects of truth were contained. To the enlightened and spiritual eye (which was granted to the patriarchs themselves) the facts of the Eternal Covenant were revealed. For example:

### 4. Better Terms

In the covenant made with Adam, God establishes the principle of **federal headship** – namely one individual acting as the representative of a larger company. In view of Adam's failure, some might protest at



the unfairness of this arrangement. Why should they be made to suffer the consequences of a broken covenant, because of another's sin? Why should the penalty apply "*even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression*" (Romans 5:14)? Away with such criticisms – it is only because God is pleased to operate on this basis, that the believer can trust in Christ and His merits – as a 'second Adam', a better head. In this, Adam "*is the figure of Him that was to come*".

The exchange between God and Noah (cf Genesis 8:20-22) made **sacrifice** the basis of blessing. The scene begins with the shed blood of a substitutionary victim, before God gives His promise. In Eden, it was seen that a federal head may render righteousness and fulfil the precepts of a covenant on behalf of others; at Noah's altar it was shown that a substitute may make atonement, and bear the penalties of a covenant in another's stead. Thus the divine pattern was illustrated by means of animal sacrifices; but the new covenant would stand upon "*better sacrifices than these*" (Hebrews 9:23) – that of Christ, the Lamb of God.

The covenant with Abraham was misapprehended by the Jews of later times as an example of blessedness on the basis of race, and obedience. But nothing could have been further from the truth. The two principles actually taught here are those of **election** and **faith**. Abraham was a nobody; a Gentile, a Chaldean or Mesopotamian; and would have remained so, were it not for the unconditional grace of God towards him, bringing him into covenantal relationship, in spite of himself and his unworthiness (cf Isaiah 51:1-2). Abraham's obedience was fitful and partial at best – but this was never the cause of God's favour towards him, as Paul goes to great lengths to explain: "*For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham . . . through the law, but through the righteousness of faith . . . Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed*" (Romans 4:13, 16).

The Law given at Sinai showed the **means whereby a man might enter** the presence of God – a supreme standard of righteousness; the dreadful penalties for sin; the blood of atonement; the mediation of a High Priest. All these things, Christ has Himself supplied: enduring

every curse, fulfilling all righteousness, shedding His own blood, making intercession. Thus admittance must be granted unto Him – and the beautiful language of Psalm 24 states these criteria (v.3-6), and shows that the Lord Jesus, fulfilling these, has entered in for us (v. 7-10). The covenant with David adds the aspect of **kingly authority** – that one who reigns by divine decree may confer blessings upon his own people.

All the old covenants are also demonstrative of **God's grace**. In each instance, the terms were impossible to fulfil, and the 'covenantees' utterly insufficient to the task – yet in every case, the blessings and advantages were **still** enjoyed, in some degree. Adam had his season in Eden. Noah and all his descendants have been spared from global judgment, at least for now. Abraham miraculously became a father, and his children a nation, which dwelt in Canaan. Israel, despite abysmal failure, was maintained as a people for a thousand years. Twenty of David's heirs occupied his throne. None of these benefits were attributable to human achievement – all were the product of grace.

## 5. A Better Man

A striking feature of all the covenants of old, is the way in which they successively 'narrow down' the portion of humanity that comes within their remit. In the covenant made with Adam, the terms applied through him to all mankind. When, some 1600 years later, God covenanted with Noah, He spoke to eight persons from a population that could have numbered nearly one billion (by some estimates) prior to the flood; now only Noah's descendants were included. Thereafter, the human race had four centuries of increase (as described in Genesis 10 – 11) before God spoke again, this time to Abraham, now confining the covenant to that man's family – with further qualifications in the two subsequent generations, specifically excluding Ishmael and Esau's lines. The covenant made through Moses at Sinai limited the terms to the nation of Israel, which was one of the smallest then in existence: "*the fewest of all people*" (Deuteronomy 7:7), and destined to become smaller still. Those who remained loyal to the house of David were themselves a minority – two tribes from twelve – and the Davidic covenant spoke particularly of his descendants and heirs.

The pattern is clear to see. If the ‘dots are joined’ and the lines drawn, they converge upon one point, one person – **Christ**. The patriarchs themselves glimpsed the truth: “*Abraham rejoiced to see My day: and he saw it, and was glad*” (John 8:56); [Moses said] “*The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken*” (Deuteronomy 18:15); “*David ... being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, He would raise up Christ...*” (Acts 2:29-30). Even the grammar of the covenants gave this indication. The Hebrew noun rendered ‘seed’, could be read as plural or singular, and accepted Jewish wisdom took it in the collective sense. Paul by inspiration corrected this long-standing assumption: “*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*” (Galatians 3:16). The principle is clear. God made successive covenants with the very best representatives of humanity – the father of the race, the father of post-flood society, a chosen man, a chosen nation, a chosen king – but none were sufficiently worthy – none were able to keep the terms laid upon them. Only a divine being could satisfy divine conditions; only God could deal with God. Thus the Father says of the Son: “*He will magnify the law, and make it honourable ... [I will] give Thee for a covenant of the people*” (Isaiah 42:21, 6)

## **6. Better Promises**

Shining through the veil of the old covenants – with their talk of human descendants, earthly territory and material advantage – far greater blessings are to be seen; rewards which are beyond the harmful reach of enemies, or death, or time and change. Thus Abraham was told not only of earthly progeny (the sand of the sea shore), but of a spiritual family (the stars of the heaven); not only of a temporal, physical land, but of “*a better country, that is, an heavenly*” (Hebrews 11:16). The patriarchs themselves grasped the spiritual message – they were not obsessed with material fulfilments, but aspired to something much better. Noah was focussed, not upon promises that applied only ‘while the earth

remaineth', but on the 'everlasting covenant' (cf Genesis 8:22, 9:16); Abraham and his successors "*sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country ... for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*" (Hebrews 11:9-10); David freely confessed the inadequacies of his successors, and instead foresaw the Lord, ever before his face (cf Acts 2:25). Though these obtained their lands, and thrones, and children, still they died in faith, concluding that they had not received the real promised good – but saw it afar off, in the life that is to come, and were persuaded that God hath prepared some better thing for us. They are not deceived or disappointed, "*for God hath prepared for them a city*" (Hebrews 11:16); and neither are we, "*knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance*" (Hebrews 10:34). It is instructive to note how many of the 'tokens' or signs of God's old covenants are now to be looked for, not on earth, but in heaven: the tree of life (cf Revelation 22:2, 14), a never-fading rainbow (cf Revelation 4:3), the ark of the covenant (Revelation 11:19), the eternal throne (cf Revelation 20:11). This is the great end in view.

Misappropriation, and a wrongful perpetuation of the old covenants produces innumerable false teachings. The Arminian and 'Free-willer' apply Adamic-covenant reasoning, and imagine that they can out-do their first father by choosing aright, or preserving their own souls in salvation. The paedobaptist hankers after the Abrahamic covenant, in the vain hope his biological children will get some advantage. The nationalistic or established churchman wants union with the state in the manner of the Sinaitic covenant, and is joined by the legalist, and proponent of works-salvation, who think they will labour their way into divine favour. The Zionist and Millenarian choose the Davidic covenant, and aspire to a physical throne in a middle-eastern city. They are all equally misguided; they are chasing shadows while missing the substance. They are collectively doing dishonour to God's eternal covenant, ordered in all things and sure, upon which **all** our salvation rests – entirely, uniquely and exclusively (cf 2 Samuel 23:5).

R. J. Steward

## EDITORIAL

There is a vocal faction within modern-day society whose objective seems to be ‘taking offence’ on behalf of every conceivable minority or demographic subgroup, and then agitating for changes in language and practice, for the benefit of these supposedly offended persons – all in an alleged campaign against ‘prejudice’ and ‘discrimination’. In recent times, this faction has promoted such terminology as ‘Seasons Greetings’, or ‘Happy Holidays’ in preference to other, more traditional salutations common in the month of December (though their principles rarely extend to any actual abstention from the seasonal hedonism and excess). Religious forms of greeting are rejected as being offensive to a secular audience.

It is regrettable that these recent trends have provoked an equal but opposite reaction in some church circles, with Christians mounting a counter-charge, resolved to rehabilitate ‘Christmas’, and celebrate it with increased zeal, and grim determination, almost as an act of protest. But far from being a worthy cause or a Biblical stand, it could be said of reactionary Christians, defiantly observing these festal days, that the world’s attitudes have ‘zealously affected them – but not well’, and not in a good cause (cf Galatians 4:17-18). There is nothing more incongruous or sad than to see the Lord’s people expending their energies in support of a profound error: but the keeping of ‘Christmas’ is just such a case.

Why would a Christian strive to justify or defend a practice which God has nowhere commanded, concerning which Scripture gives no instruction? How can a Christian claim to uphold the ‘Regulative Principle’ of the Reformers, while transgressing it every December? What possible excuse can be given for (rightly) eschewing the popish eucharistic festivals of Candlemas, Lammas and Michaelmas, only to embrace the most blasphemous of them all, ‘Christ’s Mass’? Why would a non-conformist and dissenting Christian, delivered from the imposition of a liturgical calendar, voluntarily readopt it? What purpose is served by associating the glorious and solemn doctrine of the

Incarnation with the dates for pagan worship of the sun, moon, and Saturn? How does the rampant consumerism and decadence of the world in any way honour the Lord? Does not the near-global celebration of 25<sup>th</sup> December by the unbelieving masses serve as sufficient proof that these things are ‘not of the Father, but are of the world’ (cf 1 John 2:16)?

These are some of the unavoidable questions that must occur in the mind of any right-thinking Christian, but which are annually dismissed on the basis of popular opinion and tradition. But here is a case of: “*reject[ing] the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition*”, and “*making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered*” (Mark 7:9, 13). God’s Word is a victim of these man-made practices. Preachers who would never dare to add to Scripture, or resort to extra-biblical sources at other times, have no hesitation in doing so in connection with Christ’s nativity. And the increasing adoption of ‘Advent season’ in some churches results in an entire month of Lord’s Days being lost, as truth is displaced from the pulpit by sentimentality and error. These are things, God says, “*which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into My mind*” (Jeremiah 19:5).

If godly men of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries could see the extent to which their present-day successors have emulated Romanism, Anglicanism, and the world in these matters, they would doubtless be appalled. If the Apostle Paul were permitted to speak to the church of this generation, it would surely be in these terms: “*Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain*” (Galatians 4:10-11). The proposed scheme of ‘putting Christ back into Christmas’ is entirely misguided – for He was never anything to do with it. Far better if Christians were to take themselves out of Christmas; for so long as they expend their limited time and powers attempting to defend the indefensible, they are fighting the wrong battle.

*Preliminary Announcement*

**ANNUAL BIBLE CONVENTION**

**Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2024 D.V.**