

# **THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM THAT HE WOULD BE HEIR OF THE WORLD (Rom. 4:13)**

## **The Heart of Biblical Christianity**

by Anthony Buzzard

**If you are Christians, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the Promise (Gal. 3:29).**

The Christian world in general does not understand the ultimate purpose for being a Christian. It seems reluctant to believe Paul's clear teaching that the destiny of Christians is closely related to the destiny of Abraham.

Along with his fellow Jews, Paul, a leading exponent of Christianity, knew well that God had promised Abraham that he would eventually come into possession of the land of Palestine and consequently of the whole world. The certainty of the coming inheritance of the world formed the basis of Israel's national hope of participation in the covenant promise God had made with "father Abraham."

According to Paul, however, only Christian believers, Jews and Gentiles alike, become potential participants in the very same inheritance of the world promised to Abraham (Rom. 4:13). Paul says this so plainly that only the force of a contrary tradition can account for the unfamiliarity of this basic New Testament teaching.

In Galatians 3:29 Paul makes one of his determinative statements for the whole Christian faith: "If you are Christ's [i.e., if you are a Christian], then you count as Abraham's offspring and are heirs according to the promise [made to Abraham]."

In Romans 4:13 Paul's illuminating definition of the promise reveals what the future had in store for Abraham and his spiritual offspring: "The promise made to Abraham and his offspring that he should be heir of the world..."

Combining this information with Galatians 3:29, the truth becomes apparent that the promise to Abraham and to all true Christians is *that they should be heirs of the world*.

This staggering fact, one would think, would be trumpeted constantly from every Christian pulpit, involving as it does a divine statement about the future of our earth and the ultimate control of the world. To be heir, of course, is to look forward to possession — in the case of Christians, possession of the world. Could any challenge be more calculated to stir the hearts of believers and drive them onwards to their ultimate goal?

Once grasped, this basic truth of the Bible will throw light on numerous parallel passages referring to the destiny of believers: They are “joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17), “God’s heirs” (Rom. 8:17), “heirs, because we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:17).

Heirs of what? Supplying the data from Romans 4:13, we see that Christians are “God’s heirs to the world,” “joint-heirs to the world with Christ,” “heirs to the world, because we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:17). Paul made the same point when he wrote to the Galatians: “For if the inheritance [of the world] is based on law it is no longer based on a promise, but God granted it [the inheritance of the world] by means of a promise...And if you belong to Christ then you are Abraham’s offspring and heirs [of the world] according to the promise” (Gal. 3:18, 29),

## **THE TEACHING OF JESUS**

Jesus’ teaching is virtually a commentary on the momentous information about God’s plan and promise revealed to Abraham. This is to be expected since Paul described the whole ministry of Jesus as a confirmation of “the promises made to the patriarchs” (Rom. 15:8). It will therefore be impossible to understand Christianity if we are unclear about the promises made to Abraham.

The New Testament cannot be grasped without an understanding of the central message of the Old Testament. God had initiated a Plan for the restoration of mankind when he invited Abraham to leave his native land of Babylon and take up residence in the land of Canaan (Palestine) (Gen. 12:1-4). By covenant oath he promised to give possession of the land of Canaan to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (13:14, 15; 17:8). Long after the Israelites had entered the promised land under Joshua, it was clear that the ultimate acquisition of the land by the patriarchs still lay in the future, for Abraham had never owned a square foot of the territory promised to him. All who reckoned themselves as Abraham’s descendants would share in the same inheritance. To this compelling goal every pious Israelite looked forward with the eyes of faith. Despite every national setback the “covenant” or “word” spoken by God to Abraham served as a rock-firm guarantee of the eventual triumph of the faithful and their possession of the land (see Ps. 105:8-15).

As is well known, Jesus constantly promised his followers that in the future they would inherit the Kingdom of God. It is a very simple matter to deduce from this that “inheriting the world” (Rom. 4:13) and “inheriting the Kingdom of God” mean exactly the same thing. Christians, therefore, are heirs to the world and heirs to the Kingdom of God.

The destiny of the faithful described throughout the New Testament is to inherit the “world” or “Kingdom” with Christ when he returns. This is a cardinal New Testament teaching repeated constantly by Christ and Paul and the other writers of Scripture.

Believers in the Bible must make a conscious effort to rid themselves of the well-entrenched idea that their destiny is to “go to heaven,” “get to heaven,” “gain a home in heaven,” “gain a kingdom beyond the skies,” etc. These phrases are without a shred of biblical support. They have the unfortunate effect of dismantling Paul’s assertion that Christians are going to *inherit the world*, as promised to Abraham and Jesus (Gal. 3:29, Rom. 4:13, above), and rule the

world with Jesus (cp. Rev. 5:10; 2:26; 3:21; 20:1-6; Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Luke 19:17; II Tim. 2:12; I Cor. 6:2).

Romans 4:13, therefore, should be a primary text in the thinking of those who seek to follow biblical teaching. The point needs to be emphasized: the promise of “heaven” is nowhere offered to believers. In New Testament times, unlike today, “The thought of Christian inheritance of the Kingdom [or the world, Rom. 4:13] was evidently well enough established in the churches known to Paul so that he has no need to be more explicit” (James Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary on Romans*, Word Books, 1988, p. 463).

With nearly two thousand years of non-biblical tradition working against them, Bible readers must take time to meditate on the above passages and adjust their thinking to the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. Jesus, after all, could not have made himself much clearer! “Blessed are the meek, for they are destined to inherit the EARTH” (Matt. 5:5). This is simply a restatement of the promise made to Abraham — a promise repeated six times in Psalm 37:9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34, and written long after the death of Abraham:

“But those who wait for the Lord will inherit the land...The meek will inherit the land...The Lord knows the days of the blameless and their inheritance will be for ever...For those blessed by Him will inherit the land...The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it for ever. Wait for the Lord and keep his way and he will exalt you to inherit the land.”

True to his Israelite heritage, Jesus reiterates and confirms the Abrahamic promises of Psalm 37 with his famous dictum that the “meek will inherit the land (or earth)” (Matt. 5:5).

We could not wish for a less ambiguous statement about the Christian destiny. The difficulty is that what we know as Christian literature is thoroughly steeped in unbiblical language about “heaven” (“when I get to heaven,” “I’ll fly away,” etc.). Passages like Matthew 5:5 are no longer “heard” in their original context. Their meaning is “blocked” by conflicting tradition. They will therefore require close attention, especially in relation to their Old Testament background, in order for the necessary shift in thinking to occur. Preachers who continue with language about “heaven” should be encouraged to give clear expository sermons on Romans 4:13, Matthew 5:5 and Revelation 5:10, plus the numerous texts which plainly describe the Christian goal as the inheritance of the Kingdom of God on earth. Revelation 5:10 is a precious text which amplifies the original promise to Abraham, confirmed in Christ:

Christ purchased for God with his blood “men from every tribe and people and nation, and you have made them to be a Kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign *upon the earth*.” How very confusing, then, to talk about “going to heaven”!

## THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM AND HIS OFFSPRING

Romans 4:13 connects the promise to Abraham closely to the promise to all believers. What then was that promise?

Paul calls it “the inheritance of the world” (Rom. 4:13). Jesus refers to it as the “*inheritance of the earth*” (Matt. 5:5). Only Christian tradition, which differs radically from the Bible, talks confusingly of the Christian future as “heaven.”

The details of the promise to Abraham, well understood by the New Testament church but often unknown to contemporary churchgoers, are laid out in Genesis:

Genesis 12:7: “The Lord appeared to Abraham and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land [Palestine].’”

Genesis 13:14, 15: “Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and your offspring forever...Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.”

Genesis 15:18: “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, ‘to your offspring I have given this land.’”

Genesis 17:7, 8: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

We have seen that all Christians are reckoned as spiritual offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:29) and that with Abraham they are “heirs of the world.” This is because the covenant promise given to Abraham (texts just above) guaranteed him the land forever.

It is obvious that God initially promised part of the earth to Abraham, certainly not a home in “heaven.” He was invited to inspect his future inheritance by walking up and down in it and by looking to the four points of the compass (not upwards to heaven!) (Gen. 13:14, 15). Thus modern commentaries recognize properly that “the idea of ‘inheritance’ was a fundamental part of Jewish understanding of their covenant relationship with God, above all, indeed almost exclusively in connection with *the land* — the land of Canaan, theirs by right of inheritance as promised to Abraham” (Dunn, *Commentary on Romans*, Vol. I, p. 213).

Before the time of Jesus and Paul the promised inheritance of the land had been understood to include not just Palestine but the whole world. This was based on a legitimate reading of many passages in the prophets and Psalms, which expected the Kingdom of God to extend across the earth. The following texts from various Jewish writings document this concept and throw light on Paul’s thinking about the Christian’s future:

Ecclesiasticus 44:21: “Abraham, the great forefather of a host of nations, no one was ever his equal in glory. He observed the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him...The Lord therefore promised him on oath to bless the nations through his descendants, to multiply him like the dust on the ground, to exalt his descendants like the stars, and to give them

*the land* for their inheritance from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth” (quoting Ps. 72:8).

Jubilees 22:13, 14: “May the Most High God give you all the blessings with which he has blessed me [Abraham] and with which he blessed Adam and Noah...May he cleanse you from all sin and defilement, so that he may forgive you all your transgressions, and your erring through ignorance. May he strengthen you and bless you, and may you *inherit all of the earth.*”

Jubilees 32:19: “And I shall give to your [Jacob’s] offspring all of *the land* under heaven and they will rule in all nations as they have desired. And after this all of the earth will be gathered together and they will inherit it forever.”

I Enoch 5:7: “But to the elect there shall be light, joy and peace, and they shall *inherit the earth*” (cp. Matt. 5:5).

IV Ezra 6:39: “If the world has been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an *inheritance*? How long will this be so?”

## **THE CHRISTIAN’S DESTINY**

Both the Bible and extra-biblical Jewish writings are filled with the promise to the faithful of future possession of the world.

Psalms 2:8 invites God’s Messiah to “Ask of me and I will surely give the nations as your *inheritance* and the very ends of *the earth* as your possession.” This is simply the ultimate form of the promise to Abraham of the possession of the world (Rom. 4:13).

The meaning of this astonishing fact about the destiny of the faithful is appropriately brought out by the *International Critical Commentary on Romans* (pp. 109, 111). The verse is paraphrased and explained in a way which beautifully expounds the mind of Paul:

“The promise made to Abraham and his descendants of worldwide Messianic rule...”  
“The promise is that through Christ Abraham should enjoy *worldwide dominion*...the right to universal dominion.” That promise is extended to all who accept the terms of the Gospel (Acts 8:12).

Throughout the New Testament believers are said to be “sons of God” and, as such, heirs of the “worldwide Messianic rule” promised to Abraham and his offspring. As James Dunn says:

“Integral to the national faith was the conviction that God had given Israel the inheritance of Palestine, the promised land. It is this axiom which Paul evokes and refers to the new Christian movement as a whole, Gentiles as well as Jews. They are the heirs of God; *Israel’s special relationship with God has been extended to all in Christ*” (*Commentary on Romans*, emphasis added).

## INHERITING THE KINGDOM

The standard New Testament term for the world dominion promised to Abraham and all the faithful in Christ is simply the Kingdom of God. The inheritance or possession of the Kingdom is something which believers await. The same promised inheritance appears under another name as future “glory,” glory being a well-established alternative term for “Kingdom”:

Mark 10:37: James and John request of Jesus, “Grant that we may sit in your *glory*, one on your right and one your left.”

Matthew 20:21: The mother of James and John requests for her sons prominent positions in the future Kingdom: “Command that in your *Kingdom* these two sons of mine may sit, one on your right and one on your left” (cp. “Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory”).

So Paul, in Romans 8:17, speaks of “the coming glory to be revealed as ours.” In Romans 5:2 he describes Christians as “exulting in the hope of the *glory* [or Kingdom] of God.” James has exactly the same prospect in mind when he speaks of Christians as “*heirs of the Kingdom* which God has promised to those who love him” (James 2:5).

Elsewhere the Kingdom of God is repeatedly offered to believers as their future reward, with dire warnings about types of conduct which will result in exclusion from the promised Kingdom:

Matthew 25:34: At his return, “The King will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come you who are blessed by my Father, *inherit the Kingdom* prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

I Corinthians 6:9, 2: “Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers shall *inherit the Kingdom of God*.”

I Corinthians 15:50: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood *cannot inherit the Kingdom of God*.” The Kingdom is therefore the great event of the future which can only be inherited by resurrection or transformation at the return of Jesus. Christians in their present state of frailty cannot yet inherit the Kingdom. But they must prepare for it with all urgency.

Galatians 5:21: “I forewarn you, just as I forewarned you that those who practice such things [immorality, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these] shall not inherit the Kingdom of God.”

Ephesians 5:5: “For you know with certainty that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God.”

James 2:5: “God chose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom which He promised to those who love Him.”

Matthew 21:38, 43: “God sent his Son...This is the heir, let us kill him and seize his inheritance...Therefore *the Kingdom* will be taken away from you [hostile Jews] and given to a nation producing the fruit of it.”

Matthew 5:5: “Blessed are the meek for they shall *inherit the earth*...Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Inheritance of the earth is equated with gaining the Kingdom of heaven (a synonym for Kingdom of God).

Titus 3:5: “being justified by grace we might be heirs of eternal life according to hope.”

The well-known phrases “eternal life” and “everlasting life” represent a single phrase in the original Greek of the New Testament. The literal meaning of these terms is “Life in the Coming Age (of the Kingdom).” This is exactly equivalent to participation in “the coming worldwide Messianic Rule on earth” (see above on Rom. 4:13). There is no essential difference between the promise of “eternal life” — “life in the coming age ” — and the promise of the Kingdom of God or the land/earth. Permanent life, immortality, in the future Kingdom will be possessed by all true believers.

The future of the world is inextricably bound up with the future of believers, because at the time when Jesus reappears “creation itself will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the liberty of the glory [or Kingdom] of the children of God.” Note the mistranslation in some versions which weakens and obscures Paul’s statement: “glorious liberty” (NIV) instead of (correctly) “liberty of the glory,” i.e. worldwide Messianic rule or Kingdom of the sons of God (Rom. 8:21).

## **ABRAHAM AND THE LAND**

The writer to the Hebrews insists that Abraham is yet destined to come into his promised inheritance of the world. In chapter 11 the faith of the noble heroes of the Old Testament is celebrated. It was “by faith [that] Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to *a place which he was to receive as his inheritance*...By faith he lived in *the land of the promise*, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise...All these died without having received the promise...We [and they] are seeking the city which is to come” (Heb. 11:8, 9, 13; 13:14).

Now what reward was Abraham expecting? It was to live permanently in the land of the promise, described in Hebrews 11:8 as the “place which he was to receive as his inheritance.” This place was not “heaven” as some ethereal state of bliss removed from the earth. (The inheritance is sometimes described as “heavenly,” meaning that its origin is in heaven, though its location will be on earth.) The place destined to be Abraham’s possession was none other than the land of Canaan to which he was called and in which he lived (Heb. 11:9), and by extension, as we have seen, the whole world (Rom. 4:13). The promised land of inheritance was the earth with Palestine as its center.

The same writer exhorts Christians not to neglect their promised salvation which he spells out as dominion over “the inhabited earth to come” (Heb. 2:5). God, says the writer, has not subjected to angels the “inhabited world to come,” but He has subjected it — and this is the “greatness” of the salvation which awaits the true believers — **to Christ and to believers as joint-heirs** (Rom. 8:17). The Gospel Message of salvation is precisely and expressly a statement about that great future promised to believers. This salvation “was first spoken through the Lord and confirmed to us by those who heard” (Heb. 2:3). It is “the inhabited **earth of the future** about which we are speaking” (Heb. 2:5). The Gospel proclaimed by Jesus was, of course, the Gospel of the Kingdom, which implies the gift to all followers of Jesus, of world rulership in that future society. The content of the Gospel hope is appropriately summarized in the verse which follows. The verse bears repetition: “For God did not subject to angels the inhabited earth to come about which we are speaking” (Heb. 2:5). But he has planned to subject it to man in Christ (Heb. 2:8).

It must be plainly stated again that the cherished, popular talk about “heaven” as the destiny of Christians is fundamentally misleading. Indeed it undermines and distorts the whole framework of biblical Christianity. It dissolves the reality of the Christian hope into a nebulous prospect of life as a disembodied soul (a meaningless concept!) in some unknown region away from the earth. It negates God’s great world plan to establish peace on the earth, as promised to Abraham. It negates the Gospel of the Kingdom (see Dan. 7:18, 22, 27; 2:35, 44).

The Bible promises believers that they will share control of the renewed earth of the future to be introduced by the return of Jesus. As participants in the worldwide dominion of Jesus — the Kingdom of God — they will have power to affect the destiny of countless members of the human race. They will be instrumental, with Christ, in bringing about the utopia of world peace which is now the dream of so many, but which man apart from Christ will never achieve. All this forms the core of the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus and the Apostles proclaimed it (Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43, etc.). Contained within the same message, but not as a substitute for it, are the facts about the resurrection of Jesus and his sacrificial death for our sins. The forgiveness freely offered and the grace of God enable believers to enter on the path which leads to the inheritance of the Kingdom of God.

Preaching and teaching which persists in offering “heaven” to the believer should be challenged in the name of the teaching of Jesus who expressly promised the meek that they “shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5) and “rule as kings on the earth” (Rev. 5:10). “Fear not, little flock,” Jesus said to his disciples, “for it is my Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

To be given the Kingdom is to be granted royal office in the coming worldwide dominion of the Messiah. In response to Peter’s direct inquiry about what the disciples might expect to receive as followers of Christ, Jesus replied that they would become ministers of state in the future Kingdom, the inauguration of which would be in the New World (see Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30).

## THE GOSPEL AND WORLDWIDE MESSIANIC RULE

As we saw above, the *International Critical Commentary* correctly understood the promise to Abraham that he would inherit the world to mean that he would take part in the coming “worldwide Messianic rule.” This is only a synonym for the Kingdom of God. Our grasp of the stupendous future offered to believers directly affects our reception of the Gospel itself.

This is simply because the Christian Gospel of salvation contains as its core the promise of the Kingdom of God: It is the Gospel or Good News about the Kingdom. This is the key term in Jesus’ teaching and the reason for his whole mission (Luke 4:43).

The essential content of the New Testament Gospel is seen in the following primary texts describing the ministry of Jesus and Paul. The term Kingdom of God embodies the ancient hope of worldwide rule promised to Abraham and his royal descendant, Jesus Christ:

Mark 1:14, 15: “Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God [i.e. God’s saving Message] and saying, ‘The Kingdom of God is approaching; repent [reorientate your life, your priorities and your commitments] and **believe in the Gospel.**’”

Matthew 4:23: “And Jesus was going about in all Galilee and teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.”

Matthew 9:35: “And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.”

Matthew 13:19: “When anyone hears the Message about the Kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.”

Matthew 24:14: “This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be proclaimed in the whole inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations and then the end shall come.”

Matthew 6:33: “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these [other] things will be added to you.”

Luke 4:43: “Jesus said to them, ‘I must proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.’ And he kept on proclaiming the Gospel in the synagogues of Judea.”

Luke 8:1: “And it came about soon afterwards that he began going about from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, and the twelve were with him.”

Luke 8:10, 12: The Message or Word concerning the mysteries of the Kingdom must take root in the heart of anyone desiring to believe and be saved. The Devil’s object is to destroy the gospel message about the Kingdom

Luke 9:2: “He sent them out to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.”

Luke 9:6: “They began going about among the villages preaching the Gospel.”

Acts 1:3: “He [the resurrected Jesus] spoke of the affairs of the Kingdom of God.”

Acts 8:12: “When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ they were being baptized, both men and women.”

Acts 19:8: “And Paul entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months reasoning and persuading them about the Kingdom of God.”

Acts 20:25: “...all of you among whom I went about preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom.”

Acts 28:23: “And when they had set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the Kingdom of God and trying to persuade them about Jesus from both the Law of Moses and from the prophets from morning till evening.”

Acts 28:31: “This salvation of God [cp. Gospel of God, Mark 1:14] has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen. And Paul stayed two full years in his own hired house proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.”

I Thessalonians 2:5, 9, 12: “Our Gospel did not come to you in word only...We proclaimed to you the Gospel of God...who is inviting you into his own Kingdom and glory.”

II Thessalonians 1:8, 5: “...that you may be considered worthy of the Kingdom of God for which you are suffering.” God will destroy “those who do not obey the Gospel of the Lord Jesus.”

I Corinthians 4:15, 20: “I became your father through the Gospel...The Kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.”

II Timothy 4:1, 2: “I solemnly testify to...Christ’s appearing and his Kingdom. Proclaim the Message [i.e. Gospel]...”

In addition to these passages the term “Gospel” occurs some 60 times in the letters of Paul. In every case this key “technical term” should be “filled out” by adding the words “about the coming worldwide Messianic rule, or Kingdom of God.” In this way the content of the gospel message will be protected against the loss of its central element — the Kingdom of God.

Thus, to cite two examples by way of illustration, Paul is “not ashamed of the Gospel [about the coming worldwide Messianic rule — the Kingdom of God], for it is the power of God leading to salvation” (Rom. 1:16).

Paul is profoundly disturbed by an attempt to subtract from or add to the saving Gospel. He insisted in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 that the Gospel is founded on the promises made to Abraham — the posterity promise and the property promise of land. Thus “the Gospel was preached beforehand to Abraham” (Gal. 3:8; cp. Rom. 1:1-2). On no account may it be altered in any way:

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a Gospel other than [the Gospel about the coming worldwide Messianic rule — the Kingdom of God, including the death of Messiah for our sins and his resurrection], let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8).

## **RULERSHIP WITH MESSIAH**

The entire fabric of the New Testament has suffered a drastic distortion because the key biblical terms have been “reinterpreted” — a sophisticated term for perverted — by reading an alien, post-biblical system into them. Thus “heaven” has replaced the biblical term “Kingdom of God,” giving a thoroughly misleading impression of the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. In the Bible there is no such thing as “going to heaven” when you die. What is promised is participation in the worldwide rule of Messiah on earth when Jesus reappears. For those Christians who die before Jesus returns, participation in the Kingdom will be via resurrection from the dead (I Thess. 4:13ff, I Cor. 15:23, 50-52).

At present an anti-biblical, Greek philosophical system colors and distorts the ordinary reader’s perception of biblical teaching. This system which misled believers as early as the second century exercises a stranglehold on the minds of many who sincerely want to understand the teaching of Jesus and Paul. A revolution is needed by which Bible readers refuse to use non-biblical language about “heaven,” “going to heaven” and “the dead in heaven” (now propagated incessantly by funeral sermons as well as evangelistic appeals promoting “heaven,” both as the present residence of the departed and as the goal of the convert).

It is tragic that churches have not paid attention to Jewish historians who recognize that the Messianic hopes of the prophets were directed to a renewal of the earth. Speaking of the Hebrew expectation of the coming Kingdom taught by the early Christians, Hugh Schonfield writes:

“What is clear is that a transformed human world is in view, and not a harp-playing home in the heavens. Pointers in the latter direction are of later date and partly inspired by Gnostic repugnance to a material dwelling place for the soul. We may dismiss Messianic eschatology as a fantasy; but we cannot say that Jesus and his early followers did not subscribe to it. What it did was to set a *target for achievement* which would justify the creation of man and make it worthwhile to persist in well-doing. Ultimately righteousness would be rewarded, and God’s will would be done on earth as in heaven. *There is no ‘pie in the sky when you die’ in the Messianic programme*” (*For Christ’s Sake*, pp. 84, 85, emphasis added).

Once the biblical meaning of Romans 4:13 is reinstated, Bible readers will be able to grasp the tremendous destiny offered in the Gospel to believers. With Abraham, the “father” of all the faithful (Rom. 4:12, 16), Jew and Gentile alike, Christians will strive to “be considered

worthy of the Kingdom” (II Thess. 1:5) to which, by the Gospel, they are invited. Now joint-heirs of the world with Jesus, they will later reign and rule over the nations with him in the renewed society of the Kingdom of God on earth (Isa. 32:1; Rev. 5:10; 2:26; 3:21; 20:1-6). Such a calling affords them the greatest future imaginable for a human being. The Gospel of the Kingdom or the coming worldwide Messianic rule is the ultimate Good News for a world groaning under the slavery of corruption and waiting for the manifestation of a state of incomparable glory, in which the sons of God, in company with the Son of God, will administer the world in righteousness and endless peace. This is the Christian hope and it is in that hope that we are saved (see Rom. 8:24). It is that hope which purifies (I John 3:3) and on that hope faith and love are built:

Colossians 1:5: “We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints *because of the hope* laid up for you in heaven of which you previously heard in the Message of the Truth — the Gospel.” (Note that the hope is at present kept in reserve in heaven waiting to be manifested on earth at Christ’s return.)

Colossians 1:23: “...if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, *and not moved away from the hope of the Gospel*” (i.e. the Hope of the coming Kingdom of God presented in the Gospel of the Kingdom). “Christ in us [now is] the hope of glory [i.e. the Kingdom of God]” (Col. 1:27).

## **JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH**

The loss of the Bible’s strongly future-oriented Gospel can be traced to the Church’s loss of the Old Testament. Elizabeth Achtemeier devotes an entire chapter to “The Results of the Loss of the Old Testament: The Loss of the New Testament and the Development of ‘Reader’s Digest’ Religion” (*The Old Testament and the Preaching of the Gospel*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973). She complains that what goes under the name of Christianity in American churches is a vague religion which has borrowed the name of Jesus but not understood his teaching, especially as it relates to the central covenant promise made to Abraham.

As the *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* says, “The whole future of Israel is conceived as bound up in something which God said to Abraham” (Vol. IV, p. 105). The future of Israel is of critical importance to Christians. In the words of Paul, “Through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:8). This is a summary statement of the whole New Testament faith.

The important doctrine of “justification by faith” has not escaped the distortion caused by the loss of the land promise made to Abraham which underlies Jesus’ Gospel of the Kingdom. Justification is often limited to the concept of forgiveness of sin. But as the *Pulpit Commentary* (Vol. 18, pp. 121, 122) points out:

“We must not restrict justification to deliverance from deserved penalty, but must attach it to the further idea of inheritance. As one writer has well remarked, ‘Justification is applicable to something more than the discharge of an accused person without condemnation. As in our courts of law there are civil as well as criminal cases; so it was in old time; and a large number of

the passages adduced seem to refer to trials of the latter description, in which some question of property, right or inheritance was under discussion between the two parties. The judge, by justifying one of the parties, decided that the property in question was to be regarded as his. Applying this aspect of the matter to the justification of man in the sight of God, we gather from Scripture that whilst through sin a man is to be regarded as having forfeited legal claim to any right of inheritance which God might have to bestow upon his creatures, so through justification he is restored to his high position and regarded as *an heir of God*” (Girdlestone, *Old Testament Synonyms*, pp. 259, 260, emphasis added).

Thus it is that man is justified in order to regain his status as son of God and in consequence his right to be heir of the promises given to Abraham and made possible through Christ. The goal of the Christian, which unconditional forgiveness and the grace of God place him in a position to strive for and reach, is to rule with Christ in the coming Kingdom of God on earth. A number of high frequency New Testament terms describe this goal: “Kingdom of God/Heaven” (Matt. 19:14, 23, 24), “eternal/everlasting life”— literally “life in the Age to Come” (Matt. 19:16), “life” (Matt. 19:17, Rom. 5:17), “salvation” (Matt. 19:25), “rulership with Christ as royal family in the New Age to come” (Matt. 19:28), “inheritance of eternal life” (Matt. 19:29).

Inheritance of the promises of world dominion is invariably placed in the future. For the present time of struggle towards entrance into the Kingdom of God the Christian is promised the spirit of Christ as a “downpayment” of the future inheritance (II Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). But the inheritance itself is plainly to be received in the future (no New Testament text says that we have already inherited the Kingdom): “Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance [of the world promised to Abraham, i.e. rulership in the Kingdom of God]” (Col. 3:23, 24).

Inheritance and possession of the world are offered to the faithful believers. The Greek word *kleronomia* — inheritance — is derived from two words, *kleros*, lot, portion, possession, and *nemein*, to control or administer. The Christian reward involves administration of the possession to be received. Thus Paul believed that “the saints are to manage the world...The world is to come under your jurisdiction” (I Cor. 6:2, Moffat), while the wicked will be unable to “inherit the Kingdom of God” (v. 10). The one phrase defines the other: Inheriting the Kingdom is equivalent to managing the world.

The notion of a future world government in the hands of the immortalized saints is derived not only from the promise made to Abraham of world dominion, but also from key passages in Daniel who predicted that “the God of heaven will set up a Kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that Kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put to an end all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure for ever” (2:44). To the Son of Man (the ideal Human Person, Jesus) “was given dominion, glory and a Kingdom that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away and his Kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (7:14).

The location of this Kingdom of the God of heaven is described in Daniel 7:27: “Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be

given to the saints of the Highest One. Their kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all the dominions will serve and obey them” (RSV). It should be observed that this Kingdom will not come into power until the return of Jesus. Any attempt by believers to dominate the politics of the world *now, before the reappearance of Jesus*, is utterly mistaken.

The final word to Daniel was that he should expect to arise from the sleep of death to receive his portion or inheritance in the Messianic worldwide rule (Dan. 12:13) which was the subject of the visions he had received (Dan. 2, 7, 11, 12).

Paul obviously shared the hope given to Abraham and confirmed by the prophets. As a leading Christian he had not abandoned the biblical, Jewish expectation of world dominion. He confessed before King Herod Agrippa that he was on trial “for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers, the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain” (Acts 26:6-7). That promise involved the future resurrection of the dead (v. 8, cp. Acts 24:15) and the inheritance of the world (Rom. 4:13). Speaking to Jews shortly before his martyrdom Stephen likewise testified that “God had removed Abraham into this country in which you are living, and he gave him no inheritance in it, yet he promised that he would give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him forever” (Acts 7:4, 5).

The false hope of “heaven,” as opposed to the possession and administration of the world, deserves to be revealed for the fraud that it is. As a leading British biblical scholar noted: “Heaven is never in fact used in the Bible for the destination of the dying” (J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End God*, pp. 104, 105). He observed that “the whole of our teaching and hymnology has assumed that you go to heaven, or of course, hell when you die. But *the Bible nowhere says that we go to heaven when we die, nor does it ever describe death in terms of going to heaven*” (*On Being the Church in the World*, p. 130).

The reflective reader will realize that popular sermons and preaching at funerals are in need of drastic revision. They are at present vastly non-compliant with the Truth of the Bible and the teaching of Jesus.

The truth is that a serious loss of the original Christian faith and Gospel has occurred under the influence of a Gnostic tendency which despised the things of the earth and therefore could not tolerate the idea of the earth renewed and reorganized under the Messiah as ruler. Despite the Old Testament’s passionate yearning for the restoration of the world under sound government, the churches have continued to promote a hope of bliss removed from the earth. The plainest teachings of Jesus that the meek can expect *to inherit the earth* as their reward have been treated by theologians as metaphors and are supposed not to mean what they say! Churchgoers are left with the vaguest idea of the ultimate purpose of faith in Christ. They do not see how Christianity has anything to say about the future of the earth. Traditional talk about “heaven” thus thoroughly frustrates and confuses God’s Grand Design to bring peace on the renewed earth (for example, Isa. 65:17ff) through the return of Jesus to establish his Kingdom.

May pulpits everywhere undertake the long overdue restoration of the language of the Bible and return to the Christianity which is based on Jesus’ confirmation of the promises made to the patriarchs (Rom. 15:8). Paul was alert to the danger that doctrinal corruption could result

in the abandonment of the hope contained in the Gospel. Believers could expect to be presented “before Christ holy, blameless and beyond reproach, *if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the Gospel [of the Kingdom] which you have heard*” (Col. 1:22, 23).

That hope of ruling the world with Christ was presented to converts in the Gospel of the Kingdom proclaimed throughout Judea by Jesus, designated “the Message” some 32 times in Acts, and summarized as “the Gospel” 60 times in the letters of Paul. (Acts 8:12 provides an essential summary of the content of the Christian Gospel.).

## JESUS AND THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus is proclaimed by the New Testament to be the Messiah of biblical prophecy, the heir to the permanent throne of David (II Sam. 7; I Chron. 17; Luke 1:32ff, etc.). The Messiah was the promised seed of Abraham, the one to whom the covenants and promises were directed (Gal. 3:16). As recipient of the Kingdom of God and rulership of the world Jesus recognized that his life purpose was to announce the Good News about the Kingdom (Luke 4:43). To carry out this commission he saw himself as a sower sowing the message/Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19). Those who listened and understood his saving message became candidates for royal office in the coming Kingdom. The issue of salvation and the destiny of man hinges on our response to the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it. Thus the parable of the sower informs us that **forgiveness and repentance depend on an intelligent and willing reception of the Gospel of the Kingdom**. In an amazing statement Jesus claimed to have revealed the secret of immortality and the destiny of both man and the world: “I have explained the secret about God’s Kingdom to you, but for others this comes only as an enigma. The reason for this is [as Isaiah said]: ‘These people will look and look but never see, they will listen and listen *but never understand*. **If they did**, they would turn to God [repent] and He would forgive them” (see Mark 4:11, 12).

Plainly, **repentance and forgiveness are conditional *not just on belief in the death of Jesus, but on understanding and believing his prior Gospel preaching about the Kingdom*** (“**Repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom,**” Mark 1:14, 15). The issue for Jesus in the critically important parable of the sower is comprehension or non-comprehension of the Gospel of the Kingdom. No wonder, then, that Luke records the Messiah’s brilliant intelligence report about how the message of immortality is treated in the present wicked system. Jesus said: “The seed is God’s Message/Gospel...But the Devil comes and snatches the Message out of their hearts so that they will not **believe and be saved**...Pay attention to how you listen. Everyone who has something will be given more. But people who have nothing will lose what little they think they have” (Luke 8:11, 12, 18, *The Promise, Contemporary English Version*).

The destiny and the future of each of us hinges on our comprehension and intelligent reception of the Gospel of the Kingdom as it fell from the lips of the Messiah.

## CONCLUSION

The Bible tells a coherent story. God’s World Plan, in response to the fall of Adam, is to reestablish just government on earth under the rule of the Messiah Jesus.

Man sinned by coming short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The result was that his glorious destiny as co-ruler with God (Gen. 1:26) was forfeited. The Gospel of salvation, therefore, is the invitation and command to repent and believe in the Gospel of the restored Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15), which means a return to the lost glory of man and the restoration of Garden of Eden conditions on earth. Sin is defined by Jesus in John 16:9 as failure to believe in Jesus which is failure **to believe his Gospel/words** (John 12:44-50; note verse 48).

The groundwork of this grand purpose was laid when God called Abraham to go into the “land of the promise,” in which he lived as an alien (Heb. 11:8, 9) but which was promised to him and his offspring (later defined as the faithful Christians, Gal. 3:29) as a permanent possession. This promise remains unfulfilled to this day (as Stephen said in Acts 7:5) and is dependent upon the future resurrection of Abraham and all the faithful to take possession of Palestine and the world Kingdom with the returning Messiah (Heb. 11:13, 39). That stupendous event — the return of the Messiah to inaugurate his Kingdom on earth (Rev 11:15-18) — is encapsulated in Peter’s brief reference in Acts 3:21 which speaks of Jesus’ temporary absence in heaven “until the time comes for the *restoration (apokatastasis) of all things* about which the prophets spoke.”

The Christian story was foreshadowed in the Exodus, which symbolizes our redemption from sin in the cross of Christ. But the story does not end there. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees the presence of Jesus with the faithful as they proceed throughout their “wilderness” pilgrimage towards the promised land. Christians have **not yet** entered the promised land of the Kingdom, though they have a foretaste of their inheritance in the spirit of God. Traditional Christianity knows little about the end of the story and dispatches the believer to a location away from the earth to enjoy a vague celestial existence as a disembodied soul. It is as though the children of Israel disappeared in the desert haze and never reached Palestine. The Exodus then loses its whole point.

The oft-repeated talk of “heaven” as the destination of the believer is entirely false to the Hebrew faith of Jesus and the Apostles who, in their Gospel, put before us a momentous statement about the future of human society on earth. The Gospel of the Kingdom, the Christian Message, summons all who hear to prepare now for the staggering privilege of ruling the earth with Christ and sharing in the fulfillment of the age-old covenant promise to Abraham that he would one day inherit the world (Rom. 4:13; Matt. 19:28; I Cor. 6:2). This should provide ample reason for believers to “exult in the hope of the glory of God” to be manifested in the coming Kingdom of God. No prospect could be more calculated to instill the highest moral-spiritual idealism than the challenge of being “worthy of the Kingdom to which we are invited” (II Thess. 1:5; I Thess. 2:12). I Thessalonians 2:13 promises that God’s energy will be at work in all who accept the Gospel of the Kingdom and thus align themselves with the mind and Plan of God and the Messiah.

For further reading we recommend: *Our Fathers Who Aren’t in Heaven: The Forgotten Christianity of Jesus the Jew* by Anthony Buzzard. Available from Atlanta Bible College at 800-347-4261.

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