

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART II

by Dr. Andy Woods

Because the contemporary evangelical world is engulfed in the idea that the church is presently experiencing the messianic kingdom, last month we began a series of studies chronicling what the Bible teaches concerning this important issue of the kingdom. After distinguishing the universal kingdom from the theocratic kingdom, we observed that the notion of a coming messianic kingdom begins as early as Genesis One. We also saw that because of the negative impact that the Tower of Babel incident had on all nations (Gen. 11:1-9), God brought into existence a special nation that He would perpetuate through the patriarch Abraham (then called Abram). Through this special nation, later called Israel, God would bring His messianic and redemptive blessings to the world (Gen. 3:15; 12:3).

Biblical Covenants and the Kingdom

Thus, the next place in God's word that speaks to the reality of a future messianic kingdom are those sections that reveal God's covenants with His special nation Israel. A covenant in ancient times is similar to a legal contract today, which binds the parties to the agreement to perform in a specific way. In the biblical covenants, the God of the universe legally obligated Himself to fulfill specific promises directly for Israel and indirectly for the world. Let us briefly explain the content of these covenants and then note their contribution to a promised future earthly kingdom.

Israel's foundational covenant, known as the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18), unconditionally promises three elements to Israel: land extending from modern day Egypt to Iraq (Gen. 15:18-21), seed or innumerable descendants (Gen. 15:4-5; 22:17), and blessing (Gen. 15:1). These three promises are amplified in subsequent covenants (or sub-covenants) that God made with the nation. The land provision is amplified in the land covenant (Deut. 29–30). The blessing component is amplified in the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). Here, God promised to write His laws on the hearts of the Jews.

Regarding the seed promises, from Abraham's many seed would ultimately come a singular seed (Gen. 3:15; Gal. 3:16) or descendant who would procure all of the promises found in the Abrahamic Covenant for Israel consequently ushering in blessing for the nation and world. This seed aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant's promises is later amplified in what is known as the Davidic Covenant. After God rejected Saul, who was the nation's first king, God selected David from among Jesse's sons (1 Sam. 16:1) leading to David's anointing as the nation's second king (1 Sam. 16:13). In time, God entered into a covenant with David, which promised that through David's lineage would come an eternal house, throne, and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:13-16). In other words, God through David's lineage would usher in an eternal dynasty and throne. The Old Testament continually reaffirms that there would eventually arise a Davidic descendant who would usher in all that was unconditionally promised to both Abraham and David (Ps. 89; Amos 9:11; Hosea 3:5; Isa. 7:13-14; 9:6-7; Ezek. 34:23; 37:24).

Literal

These covenantal obligations make an enormous impact upon the reality of a future earthly kingdom when it is understood that these promises are *literal, unconditional, and unfulfilled*. Several reasons make it apparent that these promises should be construed *literally*.

The promises are terrestrial or earthly in nature. In fact, Abraham was told by God to walk around the very land that he and his people would one day possess (Gen. 13:17). The promises are made exclusively with national Israel rather than the church, which was not yet in existence (Matt. 16:18). Regarding the seed, they concern David's physical line. There is nothing in the context of 2 Samuel 7 which would lead the reader to the conclusion that these promises are to be understood as anything other than literal and earthly. Since these promises to David are an amplification of the seed component of the Abrahamic Covenant, they share the Abrahamic Covenant's literalness and terrestrial nature.

Unconditional

In addition to being literal, these covenantal obligations are *unconditional*. An unconditional promise is the opposite of a conditional promise, which requires some sort of performance on the part of one of the contracting parties before the other party is obligated to perform. If these promises were conditional, Israel would be obligated to do something before God was obligated to fulfill His covenantal obligations. However, these promises are, in actuality, unconditional. In other words, the ultimate performance in fulfillment of these promises rests solely in what God has obligated Himself to do regardless of the performance of Israel.

The late prophecy scholar Dr. John F. Walvoord identifies four reasons as to why these covenantal promises are unconditional.¹ First, Walvoord notes the typical ancient Near Eastern, covenant-ratification ceremony, which God used to establish the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15). In this ceremony, severed animal carcasses were placed into two rows and the parties to the covenant passed through these rows. Such a solemn occasion testified to the fact that if the

¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959), 149-52.

parties did not fulfill their obligations under the covenant, then they, too, were to be severed just as the animals had been (Jer. 34:8-10, 18-19). What is unique about the Abrahamic Covenant is that Abraham never passed through the severed animal pieces. After God put Abraham to sleep, He alone, as represented by the oven and the torch, passed through the animal pieces (Gen. 15:12, 17). This signifies that God alone will bring to pass all the promises in the Abrahamic Covenant unilaterally.

Second, there are no stated conditions for Israel's obedience in Genesis 15. If Israel had to do something before God could perform His obligations, such a condition would have been mentioned. Because there are no stated conditions for Israel to perform before God can perform, the covenant must solely rest upon God for performance. Third, the Abrahamic Covenant is called eternal (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19) and unchangeable (Heb. 6:13-18). Thus, the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant cannot rest upon the performance of fickle and sinful men. Because only God is eternal and unchangeable, He alone will bring the covenant promises into fulfillment. Fourth, the covenant is trans-generationally reaffirmed despite Israel's perpetual national disobedience. No matter how wicked each generation became, God kept on perpetually reaffirming the covenant to Israel (Jer. 31:35-37). If the covenant were conditioned upon Israel's performance, it would have been revoked long ago due to Israel's disobedience rather than continually reaffirmed.

Unfulfilled

In addition to being literal and unconditional, the covenant, even up to the present hour, remains *unfulfilled*. While some might make the argument that some parts of the covenant have achieved a past fulfillment, when construed literally, the bulk of the covenant remains unfulfilled thus awaiting a future realization. Some challenge the covenant's unfulfilled aspects by

contending that it was fulfilled either in the days of Joshua (Josh. 11:23; 21:43-45) or during the prosperous portion of Solomon's reign (1 Kgs. 4:20-21; 8:56).² However, several reasons make this interpretation suspect.³ For example, the extended context indicates that the land promises were not completely satisfied in the days of Joshua (13:1-7; Judges 1:19, 21, 27, 29, 30-36). In addition, the land that Israel attained in the conquest was only a fraction of what was found in the Abrahamic Covenant.⁴ Also, the land promises could not have been fulfilled in Joshua's day since Israel had not yet conquered Jerusalem (Josh. 15:63). The conquest of Jerusalem would have to wait another four hundred years until the Davidic reign (2 Sam. 5).

Although Solomon gained a large percentage of the land, his empire only extended to the border of Egypt (1 Kgs. 4:21) rather than to the promised river of Egypt (Gen. 15:18) according to what God initially promised Abraham.⁵ Regarding the notion that the land promises were fulfilled under Solomon's reign, Constable observes:

This does not mean that the Abrahamic Covenant was fulfilled in Solomon's day (Gen. 15:18-20), for not all of this territory was incorporated into the geographic boundaries of Israel; many of the subjected kingdoms retained their identity and territory but paid taxes (tribute) to Solomon. Israel's own geographic limits were "from Dan to Beersheba" (1 Kings 4:25).⁶

Moreover, the Abrahamic Covenant promises that Israel would possess the land forever (Gen. 17:7-8, 13, 19). This eternal promise has obviously never been fulfilled due to Israel's subsequent eviction from the land a few centuries after Solomon's reign (2 Kgs. 17; 25).

² Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2007), 52-53, 178-79.

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1994), 521-22, 631-32; John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 82.

⁴ See the helpful map showing what was promised in the Abrahamic Covenant in comparison to what was attained in the conquest in Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Numbers," online: www.soniclight.com, accessed 13 January 2012, 98.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 533.

⁶ Thomas L. Constable, "1 Kings," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor, 1985), 497.

Furthermore, if the land promises were satisfied in Joshua's or Solomon's day, then why do subsequent prophets treat these promises as if they are yet to be fulfilled (Amos 9:11-15)? Certainly the New Covenant's promise of God writing His laws upon the hearts of Israel has never been fulfilled. Israel's national disobedience is well chronicled in the pages of Scripture. In fact, Israel largely remains a Christ-rejecting nation to the present day.

The bottom line is that if the Abrahamic Covenant and its related sub-covenants are *literal* (interpreted in ordinary, earthly terms), *unconditional* (resting upon God alone for performance rather than Israel), and *unfulfilled* (never fulfilled historically thereby necessitating a future fulfillment), there must be a future time in history in which God will make good on what He has covenantally obligated Himself to do. God must do what He said He would do since it is contrary to His nature to lie, fabricate, or equivocate in any sense (Num. 23:19). Thus, such a future fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and related sub-covenants heightens the biblical expectation of a future, earthly kingdom.

(To Be Continued...)