

## Children of Abraham

Having been born into a “church-going” family, my earliest memory of assemblies is vague. I faintly remember a one-room frame building with the pulpit in the west end. The building was moved from its place adjoining the high school to a location about a block away. There it was turned so that the pulpit was in the south end. For the remainder of my childhood and teenage years I sat in that building listening to such men as Early Arceneaux, Cled Wallace, and J. D. Harvey plus the student preachers from ACC like Otis Gatewood, Leroy Brownlow, and Clifton Rogers. To this day, however, in my mind those men stood in the west end of the building as they preached! What seems like a vague memory of early childhood made a strong imprint which actually has distorted evident reality in my mind for a lifetime.

Also, in the fourth grade of school I was introduced to European geography. I can still visualize the large map on the east wall we faced. In the intervening years I have looked at maps and the globe thousands of times, but I cannot erase all the influence of that first imprint of Europe at a wrong angle.

Much of my career of Bible study has been to reinforce my earliest imprinting. The latter part of it has been in the difficult process of reevaluating those indelible early perceptions to see if I have been side-stepping evident truths all along. Needless to say, I have discovered major misconceptions.

Being an earthly, physical being, my imprinting has been of sensory perceptions gained through seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and touching. That has been my frame of reference in relation to spiritual matters. Any concept of spirit apart from all those sensory perceptions is beyond my grasp. I find that I *visualize* the spirit as some *corporate entity*.

In order for God, the Spirit, to communicate spiritual matters to us, he has utilized earthly and fleshly demonstrations appealing to our sensory capabilities. He manifested himself in a fleshly body, which body died a physical death and was raised physically. How else could we have comprehended the nature of God and Christ’s atonement for our sins? How else could men have known he ascended back to God in heaven, as though flesh and blood could enter the spiritual realm?

So here is a part of the rub. How can we discern what is to be understood literally and what is spiritual? My earthly imprinting has had indelible effect which I am still trying to evaluate properly. This lesson will deal with some of that. I share my thoughts with you not as dogma but for stimulating study. Our eternal salvation is not affected by the tentative answers we may explore. If such a venture in thought is disturbing to you, just lay this aside and forget it.

For years I have held a preterist interpretation of Matthew 24 – that it was fulfilled in the lifetime of some of Jesus’ listeners (Matt. 23:36; 24:34). That included his “coming” in judgment against Jerusalem. But there were many other predictions of the imminent coming of the Lord throughout the NT writings. Last year I listed many of those passages in *Freedom’s Ring*, Numbers 30, 31, and 32, in a review of material in James Stuart Russell’s *The Parousia*,

published in 1878. When considered together it emphasized a theme in the NT that I had steered around as inexplicable.

When the settlers cleared land for farming, they had no machinery with which to clear stumps from the farmland. So larger stumps remained, and the farmers learned to plow around them. I have had to plow around scriptural stumps all my life, and I suspect that you have also. I don't expect ever to have them all cleared out but I keep on trying. So let me share some ideas with you, few of which are original with me.

### **“Abraham Is Our Father!”**

In a confrontation with Jesus, the Jews insisted, “Abraham is our father!” (John 8:39). By this they claimed favored status because of the covenant God had made with Abraham. Jesus disputed, not that they were descendants of Abraham, but that they were spiritual children of him.

Through the centuries since the call of Abraham until now, the confusion about the physical and spiritual aspects of the covenant continues to be a problem. Many students of the Bible are excitedly expecting a soon return of Jesus to this earth to re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel and to reign a thousand years. Then at the “end of time” this universe supposedly is to be destroyed and renewed for eternal habitation. Even though you might not have looked for an earthly return and reign of Jesus, like me, most of you probably were taught to expect Jesus' return in “the last days” at the dissolution of this universe.

It has not been easy for me to learn that the Bible is not primarily a book of history of the universe but that it is a history of God's covenant dealings with man. The “last days” prophecies relate to the fulfillment of the promises and predictions relating to God's covenants – things that took place in the first century of this era. God's covenant promises and predictions have been fulfilled! A realization of this gives astonishingly new meanings to much of the Bible.

This essay will touch on a small part of the abundant teaching on this subject in the Bible. I hope you will read patiently what I present. Especially for you who receive this in email segments, it may seem disjointed. This opening of another window of light does not alter the gospel story or lay new rules upon you. I do not claim to have all the answers but I am looking for more. So please look with me.

### **The Covenant With Abraham**

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go ... to the **land** that I will show you. And I will make you a **great nation** ... so that you will be a **blessing** ... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12 1-3). Later the Lord said, “To your **descendants** I will give this **land**” (12:7). After Lot had separated from him, the territorial and national promises were repeated (13:14f). Basically, there were two main promises. He would become a great nation in the land God was giving him. That was an earthly, physical promise. Also, all nations would be blessed through him, though it was not revealed how that would be affected. It was much later that we learn more of this spiritual promise.

What is missing from these promises? There is no mention of personal sin or salvation from it. No promise of eternal life is evident. There was no evangelical message for Abraham to proclaim to developing a great nation. The perceived emphasis through the centuries was that of earthly nationalism. God's calling of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not to save each personally but to develop this nation.

Although it is not revealed when Abraham became a believer in God, we may assume that God called and separated him because he was already a believer and a man of righteous character. Righteousness does not mean perfection, nor is the word always used in regard to justification from sin. In passing, let me express puzzlement at Paul's declaration that "none is righteous, no, not one, etc." (Rom. 3). Since I have received no blue ribbons for smarts, you might forgive my puzzlement that Paul would quote David's denunciation of unbelieving enemies of Israel in Psalm 14 and give it universal application when that very psalm mentions "the generation of the righteous."

It was after separation from Lot and Abraham's rescuing Lot from capture that God spoke again about the promise. Abraham saw the hindrance to fulfillment in that he continued to be childless. God promised him a son in his old age, and passing this test of faith, "he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). No mention is made that the Lord told Abraham that. In speaking of justification in Romans 4, Paul evidently means that his sins were no longer reckoned to his account. But we have to rely on New Testament writers to see salvation from sin given precedence over nationalism.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God renewed the earthly, fleshly covenant and added the **covenant of circumcision** saying, "So shall my covenant be in your **flesh** an everlasting covenant" (17:13).

### **Fleshly Descendants**

The offspring of Abraham through descendants other than Isaac and Jacob far outnumber those through the chosen two. However, the promise was renewed to Isaac and Jacob. All of Jacob's descendants became known as Israel, or in later times, the Jews. The focus of the historical books of the OT is of God's dealings with a nation..

After forming Israel into a nation in Egypt, though they were still included in the covenant with Abraham, God made another covenant with them at Sinai to guide the nation. It was a **covenant of law** mediated through Moses which was a combined political and religious system supported by the tithe tax. The **Law of Moses** applied to none but Israel. The fleshly mark of circumcision continued to identify them as God's nation, but neither circumcision nor the law promised eternal life. The emphasis on right living was that it affected the welfare of the nation. The prophets related righteousness with the blessings on the nation. God brought good or ill upon the nation in accordance with their keeping of his laws. Many of David's psalms deal with the kingdom involvement with its enemies. From NT writings we see that many of the fleshly ordinances and rituals of the Law of Moses were typically fulfilled in Christ.

Our physical bodies sustain and give habitation to our unseen spirit-life. In similar manner, fleshly Israel sustained and gave habitation to the spiritual promise to Abraham. The fleshly passes away but the spirit becomes clothed in immortality.

The Law separated and identified God's chosen nation. He explained, "Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a **kingdom of priests and a holy nation**" (Exo. 19:5f). It was conditioned on their faithfulness (See Deut. 4:25-31; all of Ch. 28). God was faithful to his covenant but Israel violated their commitment repeatedly.

Israel's unfaithfulness brought their national downfall into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah then assured the Jews that the descendants of Israel would not cease in spite of their unfaithfulness, but a **new reckoning of them** would be according to a different covenant. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord" (Jer. 31:31f). This covenant would introduce a new feature: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (31:34). It promised eternal life to all who would accept it.

Throughout the OT record, veiled prophecies pointed to the fulfillment of the spiritual promise to Abraham through his seed who was later revealed to be Jesus. But the Jews expected this **Messiah**, the **Anointed One**, to **restore their fallen earthly kingdom**. When Jesus entered his ministry, it is disappointing but not surprising that they soon wanted to recognize him as the king to restore the kingdom. His temptations in the wilderness were to use his powers to rule an earthly kingdom and thus avoid the cross. Jesus labored to convince them that he was to be King of a **spiritual kingdom** which was not of this world like the Jews anticipated. He was not rejected and crucified for trying to restore the earthly throne of David but because he sought to restore mankind to God.. How sad it is that disciples of our time still think that Jesus came to restore the earthly kingdom, was deterred from it, and will come back to Palestine to accomplish it!

John the Baptist, and then Jesus, came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." The Jews were familiar with proselyte baptism through which a Gentile would identify and commit himself with God's chosen nation. John and Jesus were calling for spiritual change and commitment to the kingdom of heaven, though at that time its nature was not made clear to them. Through John and other early disciples, word was spread about the land that the King, the Messiah, had come.

### **Proselyte Baptism**

A devout ruler named Nicodemus heard about this and decided to check it out. Evidently, he came to Jesus thinking of the benefits of his birthright as a Jew which would entitle him to all the benefits, promises, and prerogatives of the

restored kingdom. As a ruler he might be given some seat of power in the restored kingdom.

Here I adapt from *Free To Accept*, Chapter 27, "Nicodemus In Context" (Read more there): The recorded conversation is abrupt, but surely they had talked at length about what was on Nicodemus' mind, or at least Jesus knew Nicodemus' thoughts. So Jesus explains to him, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In effect he is saying, "Nicodemus, if the approaching kingdom were a restoration of the nationalistic kingdom of Israel, your citizenship in it would be assured because of your physical birth and circumcision. But I am speaking of a spiritual kingdom. You must abandon Jewish nationalism with its hopes and expectations and be proselyted into a different kingdom. **You must undergo a proselyte baptism declaring your change and giving public commitment to a spiritual reign of God.** It will demand such an abrupt and complete change that it will be like dying and being born again. Metaphorically, it will be a new birth of the water of proselyte baptism and the working of the Spirit of God within you. You will no longer be counted as a Jew, nor will your Jewish heritage any longer offer special blessings. You will give up fleshly Israel for spiritual Abraham. Being a Jewish ruler will give you no special prerogatives in the kingdom of God."

Whereas, in the claims of national Israel, the birth of an Israelite was fully visible and could be attested to by fleshly circumcision, the birth of the Spirit would be as invisible as the wind. Even as the effects of the wind are discernable, though, the affected fruits of the Spirit will be seen and verified. It will be a circumcision of the heart (Col. 2:9-14).

And what of us Gentiles? In the same setting (Col. 1:11-14) Paul wrote, "May you be strengthened with all power, ... giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to **share in the inheritance** of the saints of light. He has **delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son**, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Paul here alludes to this metaphor of birth through proselyte baptism in speaking of our transition from any **fleshly** hopes or despair to the **spiritual**.

The conversation with Nicodemus was not primarily about what he must do to be saved. As an upright Jew serving under the Law, if he had died the night before, he surely would have been among those redeemed by Jesus' atonement. God sent Jesus "to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 4f). After Pentecost he could have claimed that redemption immediately even as 3000 others did that day by change of allegiance. Neither Nicodemus nor Cornelius were called upon to repent like the Jews on Pentecost. They were both devout, God-fearing men, but Peter was addressing the very ones who had called for Jesus' crucifixion earlier, and he warned them **to save themselves from the imminent judgment coming upon that rebellious generation** (Acts 2:40).

### **New Birth: Literal or Figurative**

For the few of you who did not walk out on me at the suggestion that the new birth is figurative instead of literal, let me add a bit. Here I adapt from *Free*

As *Sons*, Chapter 3, "Are We Really Born Again?" (Read more there.): Numerous references speak of being born again, being born anew, being raised, being made alive, being regenerated, becoming a new creature, receiving newness of life, and putting on the new man. In this transaction one becomes a son, or child, of God which, in analogy with natural birth, would indicate that a new life comes into existence. These expressions seem to indicate that a new spirit-being is initiated into life replacing an old, dead, discarded one.

If a person dies literally and is born again literally, then he has experienced being two literal persons! Talk about Nicodemus being confused! If we think in terms of a *literal spiritual death* and a *literal spiritual rebirth* – two oxymorons in one breath ☺ -- we are letting our mind play tricks on us!

Metaphors are only one of the many literary devices used in scripture. A metaphor is a figure of speech where a word literally denoting one idea is used in place of another to suggest likeness or analogy between them, like Jesus saying he was a door, a vine, or a shepherd. So, an abrupt, sanctifying change of life is referred to as a new birth. The change initiated by faith which produces repentance confirmed by baptism is like a person putting off one life and putting on another. An old identity is repudiated and a new one is established with Christ involving new desires, aims, goals, and purposes.

The physical body is not changed in this conversion process. Each organ still functions as before. The body is still responsive to the same desires, instincts, and inclinations. Although there is help in controlling the appetites, the alcoholic is still tempted by alcohol, and the sexual interest of the lustful is not diminished by some act of God in the new birth.

In the new birth personal traits are unchanged. The person has the same knowledge, memory, experience, self-image, abilities, and emotions as before baptism. While it is true that the convert will have a new determination and added help to use and control these, these elements were not refined and changed by an act of the Spirit in the person. We, not the Spirit, must "put to death" our sinful nature (Col. 3:5). In the conversion process the old, sinful person is not perfected by an act of God but, through the grace of God applying the merit of Jesus, the person is **accounted as pure and innocent and as though righteousness were actually accomplished in him**. Because of the sinner's faith, righteousness is imputed to him. He is justified by grace through faith rather than being transformed into a different kind of person by the Spirit.

If an actual, "literal" new birth (anything spiritual cannot be literal!) is required for inclusion in the heavenly kingdom, then what of Enoch, Abraham, and Daniel? Will that kingdom have some inhabitants who were born again and some who were not?

There is no indication that the OT worthies underwent any sort of "conversion experience" or new birth making them children of God. From our vantage point we can look back and see that their righteousness was not achieved. Dying with their guilt, they "slept" in the hades world because their guilt still separated them from God. But when Jesus died, his atonement was applied to account them as righteous because of their faith. After Christ, the High Priest, presented his offering in the Holy of Holies, they were reconciled to

God and brought to him by spiritual resurrection when Jesus returned at the fulfillment of the covenant of law, judging and dismantling the nation of Israel, receiving the firstfruits who had died since Pentecost, and inaugurating the spiritual reign in its fullness by delivering the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

### **Nature of the Resurrection**

My mental imagery of the resurrection has always been vague and confused. Material concepts have over-shadowed and even contradicted the spiritual. Because I cannot visualize a spirit, I gave the spiritual body (spiritual entity) a fleshly visualization. I thought of the fleshly body of earthly elements as somehow being transformed into a “spiritualized” body of these earthly elements. That involves a contradiction of terms! A fleshly entity cannot be a spiritual entity.

Paul explained (1 Cor. 15:32), “And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.” The risen entity is not the physical body that is planted. He further stated that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (v. 50). Paul continues in the chapter to confirm that it is the spiritual, incorruptible, immortal being that survives the earthly, mortal body which cannot itself inherit spiritual existence.

The eternal Word who was God manifested himself to the physical, sensory perceptions by a fleshly birth, death, and resurrection. Otherwise, man could not have comprehended his spiritual presence. He declared, “No one has ever seen God” and that “God is spirit” (John 1:18; 4:24). After rising from the dead, he convinced his doubting disciples, especially Thomas, with “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Lk 24:39). They could not see God – a divine, spiritual being – but they could see a physical body in which he manifested himself to their physical senses.

Jesus explained further to Thomas, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you **know** him and have **seen** him” ... “He who has **seen** me has **seen** the Father” (John 14:7, 9). The terms *know* and *see* must mean detection or comprehension rather than a contradiction of Jesus’ previous statements.

In this frame of reference disciples **saw him ascend, would see his return, and would discern the resurrection.**

Timothy was advised to avoid such men as “Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:17f). Why didn’t someone confront them, “Hey, you stupid guys, look into a tomb and see that the bones and corpses are still there. Go look at the undisturbed graves in the cemetery!”? Paul addressed Thessalonian disciples (2 Thes. 2:1f) who feared that the Lord had already come and they had missed out on “our assembling to meet him” (the resurrection). Why didn’t Paul advise them to relieve that anxiety by peeking

into a tomb for a few seconds to see convincing proof that bones and bodies had not been reclaimed?

Again, I ask: Why did they not say, "Look for yourself!"? The answer is evident and undeniable, though I plowed around that stump most of my life. The answer: **They were not looking for a physical resurrection!** Only a spiritual resurrection possibly could have escaped their observation and left them in doubt or uncertainty. Paul did not demand that they change that conception, for that is what he taught!

Jesus had foretold this much earlier in John 5:21-29. "For the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but he gives all judgment to the Son ... Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me **has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.** Truly, truly, I say to you, **the hour is coming, and NOW IS, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.** .... Do not marvel at this; **for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear will hear his voice and come forth,** those who have done good, to the **resurrection of life,** and those who have done evil, to the **resurrection of judgment."**

Later, four times Jesus assured believers that they would be raised on "the last day" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). It would be the "last day" of the covenant with Israel for the Scriptures do not speak of a last day for this cosmic universe. It was near. Jesus said the hour "now is." Jesus revealed the great truth to Martha, "I am the **resurrection and the life;** he who believes in me, **though he die, yet he shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.** Do you believe this? She said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, **who is coming into the world."**

Although most Jews hoped vainly for a restoration of their former glorious kingdom, **the true "hope of Israel" was the resurrection into the heavenly** (Acts 23:6; 24:14; 26:6f; 28:20; Phil. 3:8-16). **At his coming the godly of OT times were given resurrection; we believers have been given reconciliation and life and will need no resurrection from the hadean world.** Jesus has taken our appointment with death and judgment so that he can receive us without further dealing with our sins. "But he has appeared once for all at **the end of the age** to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, **not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him"** (Heb. 9:26-28).

All of these considerations make Romans 6 so much more meaningful to me. In the ritual of baptism we died (were crucified) symbolically, were buried, and were raised with Jesus. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with



him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (v.3-8) Read it all. “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is **sanctification and its end, eternal life**” (v. 22). We are set apart in him who is the Life. “If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:11). The wages of sin is death, which Jesus bore for us; the free gift of God is eternal life which he has given us. He died and stood in judgment in our place so we will not have to. The only transition lacking is freedom from this earthly body.

By this figure of a new birth, both Nicodemus and we are called upon “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God. ... Do not be **conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind ...**” (Rom. 12:1-2). We surrender earthly expectations to accept the dominion of Christ.

### **Abraham’s True Children**

Jesus was telling Nicodemus how to be a true child of Abraham, born of the free (spiritual) woman rather than the slave (earthly, fleshly) woman. In an insightful allegory Paul contrasts the spiritual and fleshly children of Abraham. Those who hope in fleshly Israel are slave children. Those who hope in the spiritual are free – the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:21-31). John describes us as the free, eternal, perfected city in Revelation 21-22. We are his bride made to be without blemish by his grace (Eph. 5:25-27)

Later, Jesus dashed their claims of favor as fleshly descendants of Abraham by the allegory of The Rich Man and Lazarus. Instead of the Jew being in Abraham’s bosom in the heavenly banquet (like John leaning in Jesus’ bosom at the Passover later), a Gentile was the favored guest.

Here I will adapt from Chapter 32 of *Free To Change*, “The Rich Man and Lazarus”. Read that chapter for fuller treatment. The rich man may well portray the Jewish leaders and their nation. Being clothed in the purple of royalty and fine linen of the priesthood, they fared sumptuously on spiritual advantages. Paul wrote, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Rom. 9:2-5). Accepting those blessings as though they deserved them, they became smug, exclusive, and nationalistic. They could argue among themselves as to which religious party among them was right without even considering that a Gentile as such might qualify for God’s favor.

Lazarus – whose name means *without help* – pictures the spiritually starving Gentile world that was ignored and disdained by the Jew. In his powerless state, he was laid, not near the table or the door, but outside the gate. Hear Paul concerning the condition of the Gentile: “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and

strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:11-13).

While the Jews were enjoying the "chosen" status "near" to God, the Gentiles were "far off." In the company of dogs (idols), they had repulsive spiritual sores soothed only by the licking of their pagan beliefs. While they were starving, fleshly Israel had little mission even to toss them spiritual crumbs. A few proselytes would find crumbs through which means they might be led to become "twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15). But now they would be welcomed by Abraham as his children through faith and as the chosen of God in him, along with individual Jews who renounced earthly claims like Nicodemus was called to do and, together with Gentiles, would become the new, spiritual Israel. Thus the promise that all families would be blessed through Abraham was fulfilled. And so the "multitude of nations" of whom he would be father became one spiritual nation.

Numerous passages in context identify the true children of Abraham. Paul explained, "Is the blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. **The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.** The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through righteousness through faith." (Rom. Ch. 4).

Continuing (v.16), "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be **guaranteed to all his descendants** – not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who **share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all**, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations..."". The Law of Moses separated, identified, and maintained a fleshly, earthly nation, however, it could not offer life. It was the custodian, or tutor, to lead them to Christ in whom they would become the true children of Abraham. The custodian/law fulfilled its purpose and became obsolete.

Although they might not offer detailed theological reasons supporting it, most believers think that their deceased loved ones in Christ are in heaven rather than being asleep in the hades realm. If, however, all must await a future resurrection and judgment, then the heavenly kingdom still has no inhabitants! -- unless they could reach the Father without Christ. Jesus had declared that no one could do that (John 14:6). In the traditional concept of resurrection and judgment, if God were to give one minute per person in judging 20 billion of us, I figure that it would take more than 38,000 years.

Since we are reconciled to God and the Spirit of God is in us as our life, why should we be detained in hades when we leave this body? In funerals many times I have read from 2 Corinthians 4:13 through 5:10. Now I read it with deeper appreciation. In our transition we will not be left unclothed or homeless for a moment. Physical death does not separate us from God.

### **Testimony of the Holy Spirit**

The uniting of Jew and Gentile in one body as God's true people was a work of the Spirit. Rome tolerated the recognized religions within their provinces. Whether the Roman Empire was to continue to grant status to Judaism or to recognize Christianity as the indigenous religion of the Jews and God's true nation was made clear by the Holy Spirit.

Although all who underwent the baptism and circumcision of the heart into the new Israel also received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, visible manifestations and demonstrable gifts of empowerment did not accompany all. The examples of physical manifestation of reception of the Spirit showed God's approval and identified his true people. Thus, on Pentecost, there was the undeniable proof. The apostles went to Samaria where the outpouring gave testimony of their identity with the apostles. Paul's baptism of the Spirit gave God's credentials for his accepting all nations. The first true Gentile converts, Cornelius and his household, had their acceptance into the family of Abraham and true Israel verified by demonstration of the Holy Spirit. At Ephesus the converts of Apollos who knew only the baptism of John were baptized in water and the Holy Spirit. Thus the kingdom John the Baptist prepared converts for was identified with the spiritual kingdom or God's new reign through Christ. The Spirit testified of and assured the unity of God's people in one new body, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

This was all taking place during a transitional period of about forty years reminiscent of the forty year period of development of Israel between Egypt and Canaan. Formation of this new nation, the heavenly kingdom, began on Pentecost, but a period of maturity was needed. Jesus had said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away (which happened when he destroyed Jerusalem - Matt. 24:29-34 - ch), not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-19). The Law of Moses would over-lap into the kingdom while Jesus went to the "far country to receive kingly power" (Luke 19:11-17). He fulfilled it rather than destroying it. It brought them to Christ, the Messiah of the Jews. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). God fulfilled the promises to Abraham through them. The Gentiles did not replace the Jews but were included in the promises with them.

Judean disciples continued to keep rituals of the Law, even as Paul did upon his later return to Jerusalem (Acts 21:17f). The Spirit gave gifts to bring

about and to maintain the unity of this body of believers (Eph. Ch. 4), again, reminiscent of the special guidance of the Cloud and Pillar of Fire. “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for **the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we no longer be children, ...**”

### **Covenants Fulfilled**

God poured out his Spirit in the “last days” of the covenant relationship of Israel to guide them in this forty year period of development into another mature (completed, perfected) relationship with him and all believers. This was a period of “childhood” in the transition of an earthly, fleshly relationship into the “mature” spiritual kingdom – a fulfillment (completion, maturing, perfection) of all the covenant promises.

They depended upon two sources of guidance, the OT scriptures plus the apostles and current prophets. Like the Bereans, they judged what the Spirit-guided prophets were teaching by what they already knew from their scriptures. Given for this interim period, the spiritual gifts were for building up the church in this developmental stage (See 1 Cor. 12, 13, 14). Paul assured the Corinthians “that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed among you – so that **you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.**” (1 Cor. 1:5-8).

The Spirit was not sent to save individuals but to make the kingdom ready to be received at the coming of the Lord. At that time national Israel, still holding to an obsolete, broken covenant, would come to its end. Their city and temple would be destroyed and their priesthood and people scattered so that it would no longer be possible to keep the rituals of Moses. The body would be full-grown. The covenants would be completed. It would bring the final blow to destroy death, for the covenant of grace would fully nullify the covenant of law. Then those ancient worthies who were “asleep” in the unseen world because of lack of atonement would be freed to God’s presence, and eternal life would be given the living believers then, and to those who would believe thereafter. These were and are all true children of Abraham.

When the Children of Israel possessed their land as a developed nation, the Pillar and Cloud no longer guided and identified them. That did not mean that God withdrew his presence for his Presence still surrounded the Tabernacle and Temple. In similar manner, when guiding and identifying manifestations of the Spirit fulfilled their purpose, the Spirit did not withdraw and retire, but he continued to indwell his Temple, his people, giving them Life.

By parable and teaching Jesus accentuated the spiritual reign to be inaugurated and the coming judgment of God upon the then-present generation of Israel. Jesus himself said, “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he **will repay** every man for what he has done.

Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who **will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom**" (Matt. 16:27-28).

Further, in highly symbolic apocalyptic language common among the Hebrew writers, Matthew 24 tells of that impending coming of the Son of man. "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. ... Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; ... Truly, I say to you, **this generation will not pass away till all these things take place**. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (24:27-35).

It was the "last days" of the chosen, earthly nation of Israel whose identity had depended upon keeping the covenant of law which they had rebelled against. By the time *Hebrews* was being written, the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah was about to supersede the first one fully. "In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8). Hebrews 12:18-29 prepares the children of Abraham for the imminent shaking of the fleshly arrangement so they might receive the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

In those events God's promises of a heavenly country/life would be fulfilled for all the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 and including the early disciples of Jesus. "These were all commended for their faith, yet **none of them received what had been promised**. God had planned something better for us so that **only together with us** (persons then living -ch) **would they be made perfect**" (11:39f, NIV).

The covenant promises were gloriously fulfilled in perfecting his promise to Abraham that all his descendants would be blessed in the spiritual kingdom.

## **In Concluding**

Here I have tried to erect utility poles supporting a line through the Bible. I trust that there are no gaps in the line or poles out of alignment. Many feeder lines could be added.

Does this leave you with questions? Me too!! No problem. Historically, we have not answered all questions about any facet of theology. However, plowing around theological stumps offers no enlightenment. Following the traditional "calf-paths of the mind" may be comfortable even while ignoring the straight path of truth. Questions invite investigation and growth.

With some attitude of condescension, I have wondered that Nicodemus could have been so confused about the fleshly and the spiritual. Yet, now I must admit that my own earthly imprinting has not all been erased to this day. My fleshly, materialistic fixations often have distorted the spiritual.

"Are you so foolish," Paul chided Galatian disciples, "Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). A relevant question for us!

Again, this is not an essential matter any more than those speculative lessons we have often heard on “Where Are The Dead?” or “What Is Hell Like?”

You may find a great source of materials on this subject at the conclusion of my article in *Freedom’s Ring*, No. 32. []

## Copy Number 2: Caps for Bold

### CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

Having been born into a “church-going” family, my earliest memory of assemblies is vague. I faintly remember a one-room frame building with the pulpit in the west end. The building was moved from its place adjoining the high school to a location about a block away. There it was turned so that the pulpit was in the south end. For the remainder of my childhood and teenage years I sat in that building listening to such men as Early Arceneaux, Cled Wallace, and J. D. Harvey plus the student preachers from ACC like Otis Gatewood, Leroy Brownlow, and Clifton Rogers. To this day, however, in my mind those men stood in the west end of the building as they preached! What seems like a vague memory of early childhood made a strong imprint which actually has distorted evident reality in my mind for a lifetime.

Also, in the fourth grade of school I was introduced to European geography. I can still visualize the large map on the east wall we faced. In the intervening years I have looked at maps and the globe thousands of times, but I cannot erase all the influence of that first imprint of Europe at a wrong angle.

Much of my career of Bible study has been to reinforce my earliest imprinting. The latter part of it has been in the difficult process of reevaluating those indelible early perceptions to see if I have been side-stepping evident truths all along. Needless to say, I have discovered major misconceptions.

Being an earthly, physical being, my imprinting has been of sensory perceptions gained through seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and touching. That has been my frame of reference in relation to spiritual matters. Any concept of spirit apart from all those sensory perceptions is beyond my grasp. I find that I *visualize* the spirit as some *corporate entity*.

In order for God, the Spirit, to communicate spiritual matters to us, he has utilized earthly and fleshly demonstrations appealing to our sensory capabilities. He manifested himself in a fleshly body, which body died a physical death and was raised physically. How else could we have comprehended the nature of God and Christ’s atonement for our sins? How else could men have known he ascended back to God in heaven, as though flesh and blood could enter the spiritual realm?

So here is a part of the rub. How can we discern what is to be understood literally and what is spiritual? My earthly imprinting has had indelible effect which I am still trying to evaluate properly. This lesson will deal with some of that. I share my thoughts with you not as dogma but for stimulating study. Our eternal

salvation is not affected by the tentative answers we may explore. If such a venture in thought is disturbing to you, just lay this aside and forget it.

For years I have held a preterist interpretation of Matthew 24 – that it was fulfilled in the lifetime of some of Jesus’ listeners (Matt. 23:36; 24:34). That included his “coming” in judgment against Jerusalem. But there were many other predictions of the imminent coming of the Lord throughout the NT writings. Last year I listed many of those passages in *Freedom’s Ring*, Numbers 30, 31, and 32, in a review of material in James Stuart Russell’s *The Parousia*, published in 1878. When considered together it emphasized a theme in the NT that I had steered around as inexplicable.

When the settlers cleared land for farming, they had no machinery with which to clear stumps from the farmland. So larger stumps remained, and the farmers learned to plow around them. I have had to plow around scriptural stumps all my life, and I suspect that you have also. I don’t expect ever to have them all cleared out but I keep on trying. So let me share some ideas with you, few of which are original with me.

“ABRAHAM IS OUR FATHER!”

In a confrontation with Jesus, the Jews insisted, “Abraham is our father!” (John 8:39). By this they claimed favored status because of the covenant God had made with Abraham. Jesus disputed, not that they were descendants of Abraham, but that they were spiritual children of him.

Through the centuries since the call of Abraham until now, the confusion about the physical and spiritual aspects of the covenant continues to be a problem. Many students of the Bible are excitedly expecting a soon return of Jesus to this earth to re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel and to reign a thousand years. Then at the “end of time” this universe supposedly is to be destroyed and renewed for eternal habitation. Even though you might not have looked for an earthly return and reign of Jesus, like me, most of you probably were taught to expect Jesus’ return in “the last days” at the dissolution of this universe.

It has not been easy for me to learn that the Bible is not primarily a book of history of the universe but that it is a history of God’s covenant dealings with man. The “last days” prophecies relate to the fulfillment of the promises and predictions relating to God’s covenants – things that took place in the first century of this era. God’s covenant promises and predictions have been fulfilled! A realization of this gives astonishingly new meanings to much of the Bible.

This essay will touch on a small part of the abundant teaching on this subject in the Bible. I hope you will read patiently what I present. Especially for you who receive this in email segments, it may seem disjointed. This opening of another window of light does not alter the gospel story or lay new rules upon you. I do not claim to have all the answers but I am looking for more. So please look with me.

#### THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go ... to the LAND that I will show you. And I will make you a GREAT NATION ... so that you will be a BLESSING ...

and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen. 12 1-3). Later the Lord said, “To your DESCENDANTS I will give this LAND” (12:7). After Lot had separated from him, the territorial and national promises were repeated (13:14f). Basically, there were two main promises. He would become a great nation in the land God was giving him. That was an earthly, physical promise. Also, all nations would be blessed through him, though it was not revealed how that would be affected. It was much later that we learn more of this spiritual promise.

What is missing from these promises? There is no mention of personal sin or salvation from it. No promise of eternal life is evident. There was no evangelical message for Abraham to proclaim to developing a great nation. The perceived emphasis through the centuries was that of earthly nationalism. God’s calling of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not to save each personally but to develop this nation.

Although it is not revealed when Abraham became a believer in God, we may assume that God called and separated him because he was already a believer and a man of righteous character. Righteousness does not mean perfection, nor is the word always used in regard to justification from sin. In passing, let me express puzzlement at Paul’s declaration that “none is righteous, no, not one, etc.” (Rom. 3). Since I have received no blue ribbons for smarts, you might forgive my puzzlement that Paul would quote David’s denunciation of unbelieving enemies of Israel in Psalm 14 and give it universal application when that very psalm mentions “the generation of the righteous.”

It was after separation from Lot and Abraham’s rescuing Lot from capture that God spoke again about the promise. Abraham saw the hindrance to fulfillment in that he continued to be childless. God promised him a son in his old age, and passing this test of faith, “he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). No mention is made that the Lord told Abraham that. In speaking of justification in Romans 4, Paul evidently means that his sins were no longer reckoned to his account. But we have to rely on New Testament writers to see salvation from sin given precedence over nationalism.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God renewed the earthly, fleshly covenant and added the COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION saying, “So shall my covenant be in your FLESH an everlasting covenant” (17:13).

### FLESHLY DESCENDANTS

The offspring of Abraham through descendants other than Isaac and Jacob far outnumber those through the chosen two. However, the promise was renewed to Isaac and Jacob. All of Jacob’s descendants became known as Israel, or in later times, the Jews. The focus of the historical books of the OT is of God’s dealings with a nation..

After forming Israel into a nation in Egypt, though they were still included in the covenant with Abraham, God made another covenant with them at Sinai to guide the nation. It was a COVENANT OF LAW mediated through Moses which was a combined political and religious system supported by the tithe tax. The



LAW OF MOSES applied to none but Israel. The fleshly mark of circumcision continued to identify them as God's nation, but neither circumcision nor the law promised eternal life. The emphasis on right living was that it affected the welfare of the nation. The prophets related righteousness with the blessings on the nation. God brought good or ill upon the nation in accordance with their keeping of his laws. Many of David's psalms deal with the kingdom involvement with its enemies. From NT writings we see that many of the fleshly ordinances and rituals of the Law of Moses were typically fulfilled in Christ.

Our physical bodies sustain and give habitation to our unseen spirit-life. In similar manner, fleshly Israel sustained and gave habitation to the spiritual promise to Abraham. The fleshly passes away but the spirit becomes clothed in immortality.

The Law separated and identified God's chosen nation. He explained, "Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a KINGDOM OF PRIESTS AND A HOLY NATION" (Exo. 19:5f). It was conditioned on their faithfulness (See Deut. 4:25-31; all of Ch. 28). God was faithful to his covenant but Israel violated their commitment repeatedly.

Israel's unfaithfulness brought their national downfall into Babylonian captivity.

Jeremiah then assured the Jews that the descendants of Israel would not cease in spite of their unfaithfulness, but a NEW RECKONING OF THEM would be according to a different covenant. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a NEW COVENANT with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord" (Jer. 31:31f). This covenant would introduce a new feature: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (31:34). It promised eternal life to all who would accept it.

Throughout the OT record, veiled prophecies pointed to the fulfillment of the spiritual promise to Abraham through his seed who was later revealed to be Jesus. But the Jews expected this MESSIAH, the ANOINTED ONE, to RESTORE THEIR FALLEN EARTHLY KINGDOM. When Jesus entered his ministry, it is disappointing but not surprising that they soon wanted to recognize him as the king to restore the kingdom. His temptations in the wilderness were to use his powers to rule an earthly kingdom and thus avoid the cross. Jesus labored to convince them that he was to be King of a SPIRITUAL KINGDOM which was not of this world like the Jews anticipated. He was not rejected and crucified for trying to restore the earthly throne of David but because he sought to restore mankind to God.. How sad it is that disciples of our time still think that Jesus came to restore the earthly kingdom, was deterred from it, and will come back to Palestine to accomplish it!

John the Baptist, and then Jesus, came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." The Jews were familiar with proselyte baptism through which a Gentile would identify and commit himself with God's chosen nation. John and Jesus were calling for spiritual change and commitment to the

kingdom of heaven, though at that time its nature was not made clear to them. Through John and other early disciples, word was spread about the land that the King, the Messiah, had come.

### PROSELYTE BAPTISM

A devout ruler named Nicodemus heard about this and decided to check it out. Evidently, he came to Jesus thinking of the benefits of his birthright as a Jew which would entitle him to all the benefits, promises, and prerogatives of the restored kingdom. As a ruler he might be given some seat of power in the restored kingdom.

Here I adapt from *Free To Accept*, Chapter 27, "Nicodemus In Context" (Read more there): The recorded conversation is abrupt, but surely they had talked at length about what was on Nicodemus' mind, or at least Jesus knew Nicodemus' thoughts. So Jesus explains to him, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In effect he is saying, "Nicodemus, if the approaching kingdom were a restoration of the nationalistic kingdom of Israel, your citizenship in it would be assured because of your physical birth and circumcision. But I am speaking of a spiritual kingdom. You must abandon Jewish nationalism with its hopes and expectations and be proselyted into a different kingdom. **YOU MUST UNDERGO A PROSELYTE BAPTISM DECLARING YOUR CHANGE AND GIVING PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO A SPIRITUAL REIGN OF GOD.** It will demand such an abrupt and complete change that it will be like dying and being born again. Metaphorically, it will be a new birth of the water of proselyte baptism and the working of the Spirit of God within you. You will no longer be counted as a Jew, nor will your Jewish heritage any longer offer special blessings. You will give up fleshly Israel for spiritual Abraham. Being a Jewish ruler will give you no special prerogatives in the kingdom of God."

Whereas, in the claims of national Israel, the birth of an Israelite was fully visible and could be attested to by fleshly circumcision, the birth of the Spirit would be as invisible as the wind. Even as the effects of the wind are discernable, though, the affected fruits of the Spirit will be seen and verified. It will be a circumcision of the heart (Col. 2:9-14).

And what of us Gentiles? In the same setting (Col. 1:11-14) Paul wrote, "May you be strengthened with all power, ... giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to **SHARE IN THE INHERITANCE** of the saints of light. He has **DELIVERED US FROM THE DOMINION OF DARKNESS AND TRANSFERRED US TO THE KINGDOM OF HIS BELOVED SON**, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Paul here alludes to this metaphor of birth through proselyte baptism in speaking of our transition from any **FLESHLY** hopes or despair to the **SPIRITUAL**.

The conversation with Nicodemus was not primarily about what he must do to be saved. As an upright Jew serving under the Law, if he had died the night before, he surely would have been among those redeemed by Jesus' atonement. God sent Jesus "to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 4f). After Pentecost he could have claimed that redemption immediately even as

3000 others did that day by change of allegiance. Neither Nicodemus nor Cornelius were called upon to repent like the Jews on Pentecost. They were both devout, God-fearing men, but Peter was addressing the very ones who had called for Jesus' crucifixion earlier, and he warned them **TO SAVE THEMSELVES FROM THE IMMINENT JUDGMENT COMING UPON THAT REBELLIOUS GENERATION** (Acts 2:40).

### NEW BIRTH: LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE

For the few of you who did not walk out on me at the suggestion that the new birth is figurative instead of literal, let me add a bit. Here I adapt from *Free As Sons*, Chapter 3, "Are We Really Born Again?" (Read more there.): Numerous references speak of being born again, being born anew, being raised, being made alive, being regenerated, becoming a new creature, receiving newness of life, and putting on the new man. In this transaction one becomes a son, or child, of God which, in analogy with natural birth, would indicate that a new life comes into existence. These expressions seem to indicate that a new spirit-being is initiated into life replacing an old, dead, discarded one.

If a person dies literally and is born again literally, then he has experienced being two literal persons! Talk about Nicodemus being confused! If we think in terms of a *literal spiritual death* and a *literal spiritual rebirth* – two oxymorons in one breath ☺ -- we are letting our mind play tricks on us!

Metaphors are only one of the many literary devices used in scripture. A metaphor is a figure of speech where a word literally denoting one idea is used in place of another to suggest likeness or analogy between them, like Jesus saying he was a door, a vine, or a shepherd. So, an abrupt, sanctifying change of life is referred to as a new birth. The change initiated by faith which produces repentance confirmed by baptism is like a person putting off one life and putting on another. An old identity is repudiated and a new one is established with Christ involving new desires, aims, goals, and purposes.

The physical body is not changed in this conversion process. Each organ still functions as before. The body is still responsive to the same desires, instincts, and inclinations. Although there is help in controlling the appetites, the alcoholic is still tempted by alcohol, and the sexual interest of the lustful is not diminished by some act of God in the new birth.

In the new birth personal traits are unchanged. The person has the same knowledge, memory, experience, self-image, abilities, and emotions as before baptism. While it is true that the convert will have a new determination and added help to use and control these, these elements were not refined and changed by an act of the Spirit in the person. We, not the Spirit, must "put to death" our sinful nature (Col. 3:5). In the conversion process the old, sinful person is not perfected by an act of God but, through the grace of God applying the merit of Jesus, the person is **ACCOUNTED AS PURE AND INNOCENT AND AS THOUGH RIGHTEOUSNESS WERE ACTUALLY ACCOMPLISHED IN HIM**. Because of the sinner's faith, righteousness is imputed to him. He is justified by grace through faith rather than being transformed into a different kind of person by the Spirit.

If an actual, “literal” new birth (anything spiritual cannot be literal!) is required for inclusion in the heavenly kingdom, then what of Enoch, Abraham, and Daniel? Will that kingdom have some inhabitants who were born again and some who were not?

There is no indication that the OT worthies underwent any sort of “conversion experience” or new birth making them children of God. From our vantage point we can look back and see that their righteousness was not achieved. Dying with their guilt, they “slept” in the hades world because their guilt still separated them from God. But when Jesus died, his atonement was applied to account them as righteous because of their faith. After Christ, the High Priest, presented his offering in the Holy of Holies, they were reconciled to God and brought to him by spiritual resurrection when Jesus returned at the fulfillment of the covenant of law, judging and dismantling the nation of Israel, receiving the firstfruits who had died since Pentecost, and inaugurating the spiritual reign in its fullness by delivering the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

### NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION

My mental imagery of the resurrection has always been vague and confused. Material concepts have over-shadowed and even contradicted the spiritual. Because I cannot visualize a spirit, I gave the spiritual body (spiritual entity) a fleshly visualization. I thought of the fleshly body of earthly elements as somehow being transformed into a “spiritualized” body of these earthly elements. That involves a contradiction of terms! A fleshly entity cannot be a spiritual entity.

Paul explained (1 Cor. 15:32), “And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.” The risen entity is not the physical body that is planted. He further stated that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (v. 50). Paul continues in the chapter to confirm that it is the spiritual, incorruptible, immortal being that survives the earthly, mortal body which cannot itself inherit spiritual existence.

The eternal Word who was God manifested himself to the physical, sensory perceptions by a fleshly birth, death, and resurrection. Otherwise, man could not have comprehended his spiritual presence. He declared, “No one has ever seen God” and that “God is spirit” (John 1:18; 4:24). After rising from the dead, he convinced his doubting disciples, especially Thomas, with “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Lk 24:39). They could not see God – a divine, spiritual being – but they could see a physical body in which he manifested himself to their physical senses.

Jesus explained further to Thomas, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you KNOW him and have SEEN him” ... “He who has SEEN me has SEEN the Father” (John 14:7, 9). The terms *know* and *see* must mean detection or comprehension rather than a contradiction of Jesus’ previous statements.

In this frame of reference disciples SAW HIM ASCEND, WOULD SEE HIS RETURN, AND WOULD DISCERN THE RESURRECTION.

Timothy was advised to avoid such men as “Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:17f). Why didn’t someone confront them, “Hey, you stupid guys, look into a tomb and see that the bones and corpses are still there. Go look at the undisturbed graves in the cemetery!”? Paul addressed Thessalonian disciples (2 Thes. 2:1f) who feared that the Lord had already come and they had missed out on “our assembling to meet him” (the resurrection). Why didn’t Paul advise them to relieve that anxiety by peeking into a tomb for a few seconds to see convincing proof that bones and bodies had not been reclaimed?

Again, I ask: Why did they not say, “Look for yourself!”? The answer is evident and undeniable, though I plowed around that stump most of my life. The answer: THEY WERE NOT LOOKING FOR A PHYSICAL RESURRECTION! Only a spiritual resurrection possibly could have escaped their observation and left them in doubt or uncertainty. Paul did not demand that they change that conception, for that is what he taught!

Jesus had foretold this much earlier in John 5:21-29. “For the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but he gives all judgment to the Son ... Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me HAS ETERNAL LIFE; HE DOES NOT COME INTO JUDGMENT, BUT HAS PASSED FROM DEATH TO LIFE. Truly, truly, I say to you, THE HOUR IS COMING, AND NOW IS, WHEN THE DEAD WILL HEAR THE VOICE OF THE SON OF GOD, AND THOSE WHO HEAR WILL LIVE. .... Do not marvel at this; FOR THE HOUR IS COMING WHEN ALL WHO ARE IN THE TOMBS WILL HEAR WILL HEAR HIS VOICE AN COME FORTH, those who have done good, to the RESURRECTION OF LIFE, and those who have done evil, to the RESURRECTION OF JUDGMENT.”

Later, four times Jesus assured believers that they would be raised on “the last day” (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). It would be the “last day” of the covenant with Israel for the Scriptures do not speak of a last day for this cosmic universe. It was near. Jesus said the hour “now is.” Jesus revealed the great truth to Martha, “I am the RESURRECTION and the LIFE; he who believes in me, THOUGH HE DIE, YET HE SHALL LIVE; AND WHOEVER LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE. Do you believe this? She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, WHO IS COMING INTO THE WORLD.’”

Although most Jews hoped vainly for a restoration of their former glorious kingdom, THE TRUE “HOPE OF ISRAEL” WAS THE RESURRECTION INTO THE HEAVENLY (Acts 23:6; 24:14; 26:6f; 28:20; Phil. 3:8-16). AT HIS COMING THE GODLY OF OT TIMES WERE GIVEN RESURRECTION; WE BELIEVERS HAVE BEEN GIVEN RECONCILIATION AND LIFE AND WILL NEED NO RESURRECTION FROM THE HADEAN WORLD. Jesus has taken our appointment with death and judgment so that he can receive us without further

dealing with our sins. “But he has appeared once for all at THE END OF THE AGE to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, NOT TO DEAL WITH SIN BUT TO SAVE THOSE WHO ARE EAGERLY WAITING FOR HIM” (Heb. 9:26-28).

All of these considerations make Romans 6 so much more meaningful to me. In the ritual of baptism we died (were crucified) symbolically, were buried, and were raised with Jesus. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him” (v.3-8) Read it all. “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is SANCTIFICATION AND ITS END, ETERNAL LIFE” (v. 22). We are set apart in him who is the Life. “If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:11). The wages of sin is death, which Jesus bore for us; the free gift of God is eternal life which he has given us. He died and stood in judgment in our place so we will not have to. The only transition lacking is freedom from this earthly body.

By this figure of a new birth, both Nicodemus and we are called upon “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God. ... Do not be CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF YOUR MIND ...” (Rom. 12:1-2). We surrender earthly expectations to accept the dominion of Christ.

#### ABRAHAM'S TRUE CHILDREN

Jesus was telling Nicodemus how to be a true child of Abraham, born of the free (spiritual) woman rather than the slave (earthly, fleshly) woman. In an insightful allegory Paul contrasts the spiritual and fleshly children of Abraham. Those who hope in fleshly Israel are slave children. Those who hope in the spiritual are free – the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:21-31). John describes us as the free, eternal, perfected city in Revelation 21-22. We are his bride made to be without blemish by his grace (Eph. 5:25-27)

Later, Jesus dashed their claims of favor as fleshly descendants of Abraham by the allegory of The Rich Man and Lazarus. Instead of the Jew being in Abraham's bosom in the heavenly banquet (like John leaning in Jesus' bosom at the Passover later), a Gentile was the favored guest.

Here I will adapt from Chapter 32 of *Free To Change*, “The Rich Man and Lazarus”. Read that chapter for fuller treatment. The rich man may well portray the Jewish leaders and their nation. Being clothed in the purple of royalty and fine linen of the priesthood, they fared sumptuously on spiritual advantages. Paul wrote, “They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the

covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Rom. 9:2-5). Accepting those blessings as though they deserved them, they became smug, exclusive, and nationalistic. They could argue among themselves as to which religious party among them was right without even considering that a Gentile as such might qualify for God’s favor.

Lazarus – whose name means *without help* – pictures the spiritually starving Gentile world that was ignored and disdained by the Jew. In his powerless state, he was laid, not near the table or the door, but outside the gate. Hear Paul concerning the condition of the Gentile: “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:11-13).

While the Jews were enjoying the “chosen” status “near” to God, the Gentiles were “far off.” In the company of dogs (idols), they had repulsive spiritual sores soothed only by the licking of their pagan beliefs. While they were starving, fleshly Israel had little mission even to toss them spiritual crumbs. A few proselytes would find crumbs through which means they might be led to become “twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matt. 23:15). But now they would be welcomed by Abraham as his children through faith and as the chosen of God in him, along with individual Jews who renounced earthly claims like Nicodemus was called to do and, together with Gentiles, would become the new, spiritual Israel. Thus the promise that all families would be blessed through Abraham was fulfilled. And so the “multitude of nations” of whom he would be father became one spiritual nation.

Numerous passages in context identify the true children of Abraham. Paul explained, “Is the blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. **THE PURPOSE WAS TO MAKE HIM THE FATHER OF ALL WHO BELIEVE WITHOUT BEING CIRCUMCISED AND WHO THUS HAVE RIGHTEOUSNESS RECKONED TO THEM, AND LIKEWISE THE FATHER OF THE CIRCUMCISED WHO ARE NOT MERELY CIRCUMCISED BUT ALSO FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE FAITH WHICH OUR FATHER ABRAHAM HAD BEFORE HE WAS CIRCUMCISED.** The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through righteousness through faith.” (Rom. Ch. 4).

Continuing (v.16), “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be **GUARANTEED TO ALL HIS DESCENDANTS** – not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who **SHARE THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM, FOR HE IS THE FATHER OF US ALL,** as it

is written, "I have made you the father of many nations...". The Law of Moses separated, identified, and maintained a fleshly, earthly nation, however, it could not offer life. It was the custodian, or tutor, to lead them to Christ in whom they would become the true children of Abraham. The custodian/law fulfilled its purpose and became obsolete.

Although they might not offer detailed theological reasons supporting it, most believers think that their deceased loved ones in Christ are in heaven rather than being asleep in the hades realm. If, however, all must await a future resurrection and judgment, then the heavenly kingdom still has no inhabitants! -- unless they could reach the Father without Christ. Jesus had declared that no one could do that (John 14:6). In the traditional concept of resurrection and judgment, if God were to give one minute per person in judging 20 billion of us, I figure that it would take more than 38,000 years.

Since we are reconciled to God and the Spirit of God is in us as our life, why should we be detained in hades when we leave this body? In funerals many times I have read from 2 Corinthians 4:13 through 5:10. Now I read it with deeper appreciation. In our transition we will not be left unclothed or homeless for a moment. Physical death does not separate us from God.

#### TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The uniting of Jew and Gentile in one body as God's true people was a work of the Spirit. Rome tolerated the recognized religions within their provinces. Whether the Roman Empire was to continue to grant status to Judaism or to recognize Christianity as the indigenous religion of the Jews and God's true nation was made clear by the Holy Spirit.

Although all who underwent the baptism and circumcision of the heart into the new Israel also received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, visible manifestations and demonstrable gifts of empowerment did not accompany all. The examples of physical manifestation of reception of the Spirit showed God's approval and identified his true people. Thus, on Pentecost, there was the undeniable proof. The apostles went to Samaria where the outpouring gave testimony of their identity with the apostles. Paul's baptism of the Spirit gave God's credentials for his accepting all nations. The first true Gentile converts, Cornelius and his household, had their acceptance into the family of Abraham and true Israel verified by demonstration of the Holy Spirit. At Ephesus the converts of Apollos who knew only the baptism of John were baptized in water and the Holy Spirit. Thus the kingdom John the Baptist prepared converts for was identified with the spiritual kingdom or God's new reign through Christ. The Spirit testified of and assured the unity of God's people in one new body, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13).

This was all taking place during a transitional period of about forty years reminiscent of the forty year period of development of Israel between Egypt and Canaan. Formation of this new nation, the heavenly kingdom, began on Pentecost, but a period of maturity was needed. Jesus had said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish



them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away (which happened when he destroyed Jerusalem - Matt. 24:29-34 - ch), not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-19). The Law of Moses would over-lap into the kingdom while Jesus went to the "far country to receive kingly power" (Luke 19:11-17). He fulfilled it rather than destroying it. It brought them to Christ, the Messiah of the Jews. "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). God fulfilled the promises to Abraham through them. The Gentiles did not replace the Jews but were included in the promises with them.

Judean disciples continued to keep rituals of the Law, even as Paul did upon his later return to Jerusalem (Acts 21:17f). The Spirit gave gifts to bring about and to maintain the unity of this body of believers (Eph. Ch. 4), again, reminiscent of the special guidance of the Cloud and Pillar of Fire. "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for THE EQUIPMENT OF THE SAINTS, FOR THE WORK OF MINISTRY, FOR BUILDING UP THE BODY OF CHRIST, UNTIL WE ALL ATTAIN TO THE UNITY OF THE FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE SON OF GOD, TO MATURE MANHOOD, TO THE MEASURE OF THE STATURE OF THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST; THAT WE NO LONGER BE CHILDREN, ..."

#### COVENANTS FULFILLED

God poured out his Spirit in the "last days" of the covenant relationship of Israel to guide them in this forty year period of development into another mature (completed, perfected) relationship with him and all believers. This was a period of "childhood" in the transition of an earthly, fleshly relationship into the "mature" spiritual kingdom – a fulfillment (completion, maturing, perfection) of all the covenant promises.

They depended upon two sources of guidance, the OT scriptures plus the apostles and current prophets. Like the Bereans, they judged what the Spirit-guided prophets were teaching by what they already knew from their scriptures. Given for this interim period, the spiritual gifts were for building up the church in this developmental stage (See 1 Cor. 12, 13, 14). Paul assured the Corinthians "that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed among you – so that YOU ARE NOT LACKING IN ANY SPIRITUAL GIFT, AS YOU WAIT FOR THE REVEALING OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST; WHO WILL SUSTAIN YOU TO THE END, GUILTLESS IN THE DAY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST." (1 Cor. 1:5-8).

The Spirit was not sent to save individuals but to make the kingdom ready to be received at the coming of the Lord. At that time national Israel, still holding to an obsolete, broken covenant, would come to its end. Their city and temple would be destroyed and their priesthood and people scattered so that it would no longer be possible to keep the rituals of Moses. The body would be full-grown. The covenants would be completed. It would bring the final blow to destroy death, for the covenant of grace would fully nullify the covenant of law. Then

those ancient worthies who were “asleep” in the unseen world because of lack of atonement would be freed to God’s presence, and eternal life would be given the living believers then, and to those who would believe thereafter. These were and are all true children of Abraham.

When the Children of Israel possessed their land as a developed nation, the Pillar and Cloud no longer guided and identified them. That did not mean that God withdrew his presence for his Presence still surrounded the Tabernacle and Temple. In similar manner, when guiding and identifying manifestations of the Spirit fulfilled their purpose, the Spirit did not withdraw and retire, but he continued to indwell his Temple, his people, giving them Life.

By parable and teaching Jesus accentuated the spiritual reign to be inaugurated and the coming judgment of God upon the then-present generation of Israel. Jesus himself said, “For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he WILL REPAY every man for what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who WILL NOT TASTE DEATH BEFORE THEY SEE THE SON OF MAN COMING IN HIS KINGDOM” (Matt. 16:27-28).

Further, in highly symbolic apocalyptic language common among the Hebrew writers, Matthew 24 tells of that impending coming of the Son of man. “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man. ... Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken; then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; ... Truly, I say to you, THIS GENERATION WILL NOT PASS AWAY TILL ALL THESE THINGS TAKE PLACE. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (24:27-35).

It was the “last days” of the chosen, earthly nation of Israel whose identity had depended upon keeping the covenant of law which they had rebelled against. By the time *Hebrews* was being written, the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah was about to supersede the first one fully. “In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8). Hebrews 12:18-29 prepares the children of Abraham for the imminent shaking of the fleshly arrangement so they might receive the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

In those events God’s promises of a heavenly country/life would be fulfilled for all the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 and including the early disciples of Jesus. “These were all commended for their faith, yet NONE OF THEM RECEIVED WHAT HAD BEEN PROMISED. God had planned something better for us so that ONLY TOGETHER WITH US (persons then living -ch) WOULD THEY BE MADE PERFECT” (11:39f, NIV).

The covenant promises were gloriously fulfilled in perfecting his promise to Abraham that all his descendants would be blessed in the spiritual kingdom.

IN CONCLUDING

Here I have tried to erect utility poles supporting a line through the Bible. I trust that there are no gaps in the line or poles out of alignment. Many feeder lines could be added.

Does this leave you with questions? Me too!! No problem. Historically, we have not answered all questions about any facet of theology. However, plowing around theological stumps offers no enlightenment. Following the traditional "calf-paths of the mind" may be comfortable even while ignoring the straight path of truth. Questions invite investigation and growth.

With some attitude of condescension, I have wondered that Nicodemus could have been so confused about the fleshly and the spiritual. Yet, now I must admit that my own earthly imprinting has not all been erased to this day. My fleshly, materialistic fixations often have distorted the spiritual.

"Are you so foolish," Paul chided Galatian disciples, "Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). A relevant question for us!

Again, this is not an essential matter any more than those speculative lessons we have often heard on "Where Are The Dead?" or "What Is Hell Like?"

You may find a great source of materials on this subject at the conclusion of my article in *Freedom's Ring*, No. 32. []