

Heaven, Earth, and Abraham

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1.1)*

Introduction

The Bible makes a distinction between heaven and earth in both Old and New Testaments. This distinction is placed not only on the present creation but the future creation as well (Isaiah 66.22; Revelation 21.1). The Scriptures, therefore, do not speak of reality as the “universe” but as “heaven (or heavens)” and “earth” (Ephesians 1.10; Colossians 1.16; Hebrews 1.10; James 5.12; 2 Peter 3.5, 7, 10, 13; Revelation 20.11, 21.1). This phraseology is not merely idiomatic language to describe different physical realities. Intrinsic in the distinction of heaven and earth as separate identities is God’s plan of redemption. We discover this first in God’s call of the man Abram.

Earthly Promises: Israel

Before Genesis 12, God dealt with the human race as a whole. Beginning in Genesis 12, we find a change. God introduced an entirely new program through which to accomplish His plan. This would involve the call of one man through whom He would create a new race of people: the Jews.

Genesis 12

¹ *Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you;*

² *And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing;*

³ *And I will bless those who bless you, and the one*

who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

The text above is known as the Abrahamic Covenant. From this text, we learn of God's calling of Abram (later Abraham). He told him to leave his country and to go to one He would show him. God promised that He would do the following for Abraham:

1. Make him a great nation
2. Bless him
3. Make his name great
4. Be a blessing
5. Bless those who blessed him
6. Curse those who cursed him
7. In him, all the families of the earth be blessed

By these statements, God declared that Abraham and his progeny were "special" (Deuteronomy 7.6-8). God sovereignly extended His blessings to Abraham and his progeny; He would bless those who blessed Abraham's progeny and curse those who opposed them. God sovereignly declared that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.

Genesis 13

¹⁴ *The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; ¹⁵ for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. ¹⁶ I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. ¹⁷ Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you."*

After God had established his promise to Abraham, He revealed

more details about the covenant. From the passage below, we learn that included in “make you a great nation” was a land deed. God told Abram that all the land that he could see and walk would be his and his descendants forever. We find also here the first mention of “earth” in God’s promise that he would make Abram’s descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth.

Genesis 15

¹ After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.” ² Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.” ⁴ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” ⁵ And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” ⁶ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Paul used this text to make his great argument of justification by faith alone. God told Abram that He was Abram’s protector and reward (verse 1). In response, Abram asked God how He was going to do what He had promised to do since he remained childless (verses 2-3). God reiterated His promise to Abram that he would have a child from his own body (verse 4). God then took Abram outside and showed him the heavens and declared that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (verse 5). This is the first mention of a “heavenly” progeny. Abram’s response to this declaration was

“he believed in the Lord.” God’s response to Abram’s faith was to reckon him righteous (verse 6). Paul had much to say about this which we will examine below.

Genesis 22

¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba.

This last passage from Genesis is unique in that it referenced both heavenly (verse 17a) and earthly aspects of his descendants (verse 17b). This passage concludes the familiar story of Abraham’s (he now has a new name) willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Heavenly and Earthly Promises

The above passages form a template for heavenly and earthly promises and blessings. The Jews had no concept of dying and going to heaven or having anything to do with heaven. Their only interaction with things heavenly was through the visions of prophets who saw the glory and holiness of God and His throne complex (cf. Isaiah 6.1-6; Ezekiel 1-3; Daniel 7.9-28, 10-12). We find no biblical record of heaven as a destiny for Israel. Rather, all of God’s promises to Israel were earthly.

God’s earthly promises to Israel included a land and a

kingdom. The vehicle of these promises were God's covenants to the nation. The promise of an earthly kingdom began with His covenant with Abraham which included a land provision. Through His covenant with David, He promised He would establish David's line upon the throne and his kingdom forever. (2 Samuel 7.8-17). The Jews understood these promises and anticipated this kingdom (Luke 1.31-33, 46-55, 67-79) since God had described it in hundreds passages through His prophets (cf. Isaiah 2.2-4, 11.1-10; Ezekiel 37.1-28; Zechariah 14.9-21).

Romans 4

¹ *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Romans 4.1-3).*

The above verses established Paul's argument for salvation of faith plus nothing. God declared Abraham righteous on the sole basis of his faith. Using this passage as his foundation, Paul revealed a whole new order of salvation.

Salvation for the Jew under the Mosaic Law was based upon both faith and works, never faith alone. The Levitical sacrifices formed the vehicle of salvation.¹ It was not enough for a Jew to say he believed God would cover his sin by means of animal sacrifice. He had to bring the sacrifice. Bringing the animal to the priest was a work. On the other hand, it was insufficient for a Jew to only bring an animal to the priest. The sacrifice did no good for the individual unless he coupled the sacrifice with faith. Faith has always been required but not until Paul was salvation on the basis of faith alone.

We find the same kind of thing in the gospels. Once the Messiah arrived, salvation was based on believing that He was the Messiah (Matthew 16.13-17; John 11.23-27). But in addition to believing this, water baptism was required (Matthew 3.1, 6, 11; Acts 2.38). Water baptism was a work. Jewish salvation required faith and works. The exception was Abraham. And that was why Paul used him for his example.

¹⁶ *For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist (Romans 4.16-17).*

In the passage above, Paul quoted God's promise to make Abraham the father of many nations. Paul's point was to link part of the fulfillment of this promise to us, the body of Christ. Abraham is the father of all true believers of Israel and the Church because of faith. The following passages provide additional insight as to what Paul meant.

Galatians 3

⁶ *Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. ⁷ Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸ The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." ⁹ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.*

Paul reiterated the Genesis 15 passage in which God declared

Abraham righteous on the basis of faith alone. He made two main points with this passage. The first was that all who believe are “sons of Abraham” (verse 7). Paul’s second point was about God justifying Gentiles. Thus, he quoted, “all the nations (ἔθνος, Gentiles) will be blessed in you.” As the “apostle to the Gentiles,” (Romans 11.13) Paul magnified his ministry to Gentiles. Paul’s ministry was entirely different from the ministry of Jesus and the Twelve. Jesus ministered to Jews (Matthew 10.5; Romans 15.8), not Gentiles. Peter and the Eleven ministered to Jews (Matthew 10.5; Acts 2.14, 22, 29, 36, 3.12, 17; Galatians 2.7-9) not Gentiles. Paul ministered to Jews (especially noted in Acts) but later almost exclusively to Gentiles. Paul’s epistles reflect this transition and change (cf. Acts 13.45-52, 18.6-6, 28.23-31).

²⁶ For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.

In Galatians 3.26-29, Paul reiterated his point of salvation by faith alone. All who believe his gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) are sons of God. Furthermore, this faith included being baptized into Christ, i.e., identified in His death and resurrection (Romans 6). One result of this baptism is to make the believer a member of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.13). Such membership means that distinctions of Jew and Gentile disappear. The reader should pause at this point to reflect on how different Paul’s teaching was compared to Jesus’ earthly ministry or what the Twelve taught. Jesus and the Twelve had no ministry to Gentiles. Neither did they teach about the body of Christ or our baptism with Christ in His

death and resurrection. The last point Paul made was that the believer of his gospel became a descendant of Abraham.

Did Paul mean that a Gentile became a Jew when he believed the gospel? Did he mean that in functional terms Jews were not Jews, Gentiles were not Gentiles, or that the Church was not the Church (1 Corinthians 10.32)? No, Paul taught that becoming a member of the body of Christ meant that God had removed the distinctions between Jew and Gentile that had been in force for 2,000 years. This was revolutionary! Before Paul, beginning with Abraham, Jews had held a privileged position before God (Deuteronomy 7.6-8). After God revealed to Paul the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24) in which the one who trusted in Christ's death and resurrection became a member of the body of Christ such distinctions no longer applied. We must also point out that this doctrine is only taught by Paul. You will not find it taught by Jesus in His earthly ministry or by Peter, or by the other eleven apostles. Paul's point (and he repeated it over and over) was that when one believed his gospel of faith plus nothing he followed the pattern of Abraham who was saved by faith plus nothing.

Heavenly Promises: Church, the body of Christ

Ephesians 1

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,

God's promises to Israel, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant and following in His additional covenants, were all earthly. The promises decreed a people, a land, and a kingdom. God's promises to the Church, the body of Christ, are all heavenly. The Jew under the covenants had no concept or promise of dying and going to heaven. We do. Paul revealed that God had blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the

heavenly places in Christ. This was language that had never been used towards Israel.

Philippians 3

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

In addition to having heavenly-based spiritual blessings, Paul revealed that members of the body of Christ are citizens of heaven. Again, this was never said of any Jew. Jesus never that Jews had heavenly citizenship nor did Peter or the Eleven. This was a new revelation that God gave to the Apostle Paul.

Colossians 1

¹³ For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Again, the above verse revealed new truth. God has rescued the believer of Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) from darkness to the kingdom of His Son. This kingdom, at the present time, is located in heaven: the kingdom is wherever the King is.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he disclosed to the believers there the wonderful hope that a new body awaits us in heaven. God created us with not just souls and spirits. He gave us bodies. C. S. Lewis wrote, "God likes matter. He invented it." Our present bodies, through which we enjoy many experiences, are subject to pain and decay. But one day believers will have eternal bodies without these weaknesses.

What a glorious expectation!

¹ For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, ³ inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴ For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. ⁶ Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight— ⁸ we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5.1-8).

New Heavens, New Earth

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21.1-4).

John recorded that God will create a new heaven and a new earth (cf. Isaiah 65.17; 2 Peter 3.10-12). Detailed physical characteristics of this new creation are not revealed. What is revealed, however, is that this new creation will be much different from the present one.

¹⁰ *And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹ having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. ¹² It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. ¹³ There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. ¹⁴ And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21.10-14).*

John repeated what he had recorded in verse 2 about Jerusalem coming down from heaven onto the earth. The Old Testament and Hebrews recorded that God instructed Moses to build the Tabernacle after a heavenly pattern (Exodus 25.9, 40; Numbers 8.4; Hebrews 8.5). The Tabernacle was an earthly representation of a heavenly reality: the throne complex and heavenly abode of God. This passage, however, is the first to document that a heavenly city—Jerusalem—exists in heaven.

¹⁵ *The one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall. ¹⁶ The city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷ And he*

measured its wall, seventy-two yards, according to human measurements, which are also angelic measurements. ¹⁸ The material of the wall was jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹ The foundation stones of the city wall were adorned with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation stone was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, chalcedony; the fourth, emerald; ²⁰ the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoptase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. ²¹ And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass (Revelation 21.15-21).

God will move the heavenly Jerusalem to the new earth. The city is immense: 1,500 miles high, long, and wide (cube or pyramid?). Such a city is impossible on our current earth. Will the new earth be significantly larger than our present one? Will the atmosphere be like ours? The Scriptures are silent on these matters. We can only wonder. What is clear is that the city will be glorious. The full significance of the relocation has yet to be revealed but in this new environment, a closer relationship of heaven and earth exists.

Conclusion

God used "heaven and earth" to declare not only His creation of the universe but to provide a template of salvation for two distinctive entities: Israel and the Church (the body of Christ). To Israel, God made earthly promises. To the Church, He made heavenly promises. Both sets of promises originate in Abraham. God promised Abraham earthly, "dust of the earth," "sand on the seashore" (Genesis 13.16, 22.17) and heavenly, "stars of the heavens" (Genesis 15.5, 22.17) descendants. Abraham's earthly descendants were Jews who believed in the God of the Old Testament (YHVH, יְהוָה). The heavenly

descendants are both Jews and Gentiles (but primarily Gentiles) who have believed Paul's gospel of grace (Acts 20.24; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4).

¹ Animal sacrifices could not pay sin's penalty (Hebrews 9.11-14, 10.1-4). Animal sacrifices were a temporary, stopgap solution until Christ Himself paid for our sins. God used animal sacrifices as "types" to point to the future work of Christ. Nevertheless, Jews were required to offer sacrifices and believe in their efficacy, i.e., that the sacrifices covered their sin and fulfilled the demands of a holy God.

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