

Your Share in God's Promises

Bible Teaching on "The Hope of Israel"

WE talk about hope in everyday conversation. We say "I hope you feel better soon", or "We hope to go abroad this year" or "I hope the strike will be over by next week". We mean there is something in the future we should very much like to happen, and we feel cautiously optimistic that it will. Life without hope would be very grim. Even in the worst of circumstances, people like to look on the bright side. A poet wrote: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." Hope can give men extraordinary tenacity of spirit—miners trapped by a roof fall, or sailors drifting on a raft, will often fight death for days, convinced that their friends will come to the rescue before it is too late. Sadly, of course, they are sometimes disappointed. It can happen that the rock fall is too deep to tunnel through, or no one knows the ship has foundered. In this case the chance to which they cling does not exist, and their hope is an illusion.

Hope with a Foundation

Hope is a topic that crops up frequently in the Bible. Both in the Old Testament and the New, the writers are full of optimism. They look about them on a dreary and unjust world where so frequently suffering comes upon the innocent and evil men triumph, yet they have tremendous confidence that one day God the Creator is going to turn the tables the right way up. Not only that, but they seem to be convinced that they themselves will have a share in the improvements that will come. Listen to the Psalmist, for example: "Thou who hast done great things, O God, who is like thee? Thou who hast made me see many sore troubles wilt revive me again; from the depths of the earth thou wilt bring me up again . . . I will sing praises to thee with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips shall shout for joy, when I sing praises to thee" (Psalm 71:19-23). There is no doubt about this man's confidence in the future.

Or Paul the Apostle, in calmer mood, in this passage from his letter to Timothy: "I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." See how assured he is, as he continues: "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

This last passage is particularly interesting because it was written from a death cell. The Roman Emperor had turned against the Christians, and the aged Apostle was on trial for his life. There had been a first court hearing, and he was waiting for the second. He knew the outcome already as he penned the letter to young Timothy from his chilly prison. He was going to die. In spite of this gloomy prospect, he is full of hope. Unlike the trapped miner or the shipwrecked mariner, he does not grab at the slender chance that something will turn up—some vital document, or friendly witness, perhaps, to clear him of the charge. His hope transcends the certainty of his death. He is absolutely positive that even after he has died, a God in heaven will bring him back to a new and better life, at the last Day.

Absolute Conviction

The hope of the Bible writers is clearly something much stronger than cautious optimism. They have definite ideas about what is going to happen in the future, and they really look forward to it coming to pass. You probably envy the Apostle Paul his conviction, especially if you are passing through pain or sorrow in your life. You may have doubted in the past that you could ever be sure there is something to hope for beyond the grave. You may wonder, too, what the world is coming to, and what your children and grandchildren are going to inherit when you are gone. Well, take heart. The Bible has the key to the future, both the world's and yours. It presents a plan that God has been following consistently from the beginning, based on promises

He has made. The outline, beginning with Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, and expanding through the Prophets into the New Testament writings, is so clear and logical a child can understand it. It can give you a confidence that will take you through the darkest valley of suffering, and God has provided evidence to support your faith so strong that only the folly of pride could blind your eyes. Read on and see how it all hangs together.

The Promises to Abraham

The beginning of our story is in the Old Testament, the book of the people of Israel. Do not let this put you off. The Old Testament is neither redundant nor out of date. The territory may be unfamiliar, but there is real treasure to be found in these early books of the Bible. Few people have heard, for example, of the promises to Abraham, yet they form the very foundation of God's master plan. Let us briefly recount them.

Abraham was a remarkable character who lived around 3,000 B.C. in a city called Ur which was in the land we now know as Iraq. He was visited one day by a messenger from the Lord, who told him to leave his birthplace. "Go", said the Lord, "to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). Because he trusted in God, Abraham sold up all his possessions and set off across the desert with his relatives. They came to the land we know as Israel. After he had briefly surveyed the country, the Lord appeared again, and said: "To your descendants I will give this land" (Genesis 12:7). This generous offer was particularly pleasing to Abraham and his wife Sarah, because in spite of a long and happy marriage, they had no children. It seemed the Lord was promising them a family, as well as somewhere to live. Some years passed. Abraham continued to camp out in his tent, waiting patiently for something to happen, but there was no sign of a baby on the way, and the native inhabitants of the land continued to go about their business.

One evening the messenger of the Lord appeared again. Abraham seized the opportunity to ask two important questions. "Behold", he complained gently, "thou hast given me no offspring". For answer, he was taken outside his tent and shown the sky, ablaze with stars. "Number the stars, if you are able to number them", he was told. "So shall your descendants be!" The other point troubling Abraham was the matter of the land. "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur . . . to give you this land to possess the angel reminded him. O Lord God", he replied, "how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Genesis 15:3-8).

A Solemn Covenant

For answer, the Lord proceeded to make a very solemn agreement with Abraham, after the custom of the time, termed a "covenant". He was instructed to collect a number of carefully specified animals and birds, which were sacrificed. The bodies were divided and laid on the ground. Normally, the two parties to a covenant would pass between the pieces, thus making it legally binding. In this case, as God was promising something to Abraham, He passed between the pieces. What Abraham saw, in the velvet darkness, was a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, the form in which, so often, God has revealed Himself to His people. Abraham was satisfied. A covenant confirmed in this way could not be broken.

The years flew by. In time, as Abraham grew to know God, the promises were repeated and enlarged. Two themes ran through them unchanged-the possession of the land, and the future of his descendants. It is worth tracing the development, through Genesis 13, 15, 17 and 22. The most impressive promise of the whole series was the last. This one began with an oath: "By myself have I sworn", said the Lord. It continued on a familiar note: "I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea shore." It ended in mystery:

"Thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:17,18, A.V.).

Notice the change in person from a plural, numerous, "seed" or offspring, to an offspring or seed in the singular. Note, too, his importance. To "possess the gate" of someone is a Hebrew idiom. In ancient times, the gate was the only entrance to a fortified city. It was also the place where the rulers held court. To possess the gate of your enemies was to have complete control. Abraham's descendant was to be all conquering, and bring universal happiness. Whom did God have in mind? Abraham could only guess, and believe.

Twenty-five years after the making of the covenants, Sarah told Abraham with great excitement that she was going to have a baby. God was keeping His word. Through all that time Abraham never doubted God would give him a son. The Apostle Paul makes this comment about him in Romans: "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:20,21). Abraham's faith was unshakeable.

No Inheritance . . . Yet

The only disturbing note in the biography of this great pioneer is the fact that when he died, he still did not possess the land. God had several times promised it to him, personally, as well as to his descendants. Yet, as the martyr Stephen recounts, God "gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length" (Acts 7:5). He died in a tent, with not even a house to his name. Yet Abraham's confidence in God could surmount even this final obstacle. Along with his wife and children, says the writer to the Hebrews, he "died in faith not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar" (Hebrews 11:13).

You can see now why Abraham is called "father of the faithful". God had brought him to the promised land. God had given him a son. If God said he would inherit the land, he believed he would, even though he had to die.

Four centuries after Abraham died, his family had grown into a nation. God had repeated the promise of the land to his son Isaac, and again to his grandson Jacob, so that it ran in the family. Jacob had a second name, Israel. He bore twelve sons, each of whom became the head of a tribe or clan with thousands of members. During a time of famine the family migrated to Egypt and settled there. As they multiplied, the Egyptians grew fearful of their power, and enslaved them. Moses, the great lawgiver, was sent to set them free. After a series of calamities which ruined his country, the Egyptian Pharaoh was forced to let them go, and the Israelites set off across the wilderness to their homeland. Remarkably, this very event had been predicted in one of the promises to Abraham, as you can check for yourself in Genesis 15:13-16.

God's Oath to Israel

At Mount Sinai, the angel of the Lord made another covenant, this time with the whole people of Israel. Sealed by the blood of sacrifices, it gave them the key to the land of Israel, so long as they kept the wise commandments of God's Law. Years later, as they stood on the brink of the Promised Land, Moses reminded them that God, after hundreds of years, was about to keep His word. "It is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand . . . Know therefore," he went on, "that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations" (Deuteronomy 7:8,9).

That was a staggering statement to make. A typical generation spans something like a quarter of a century. A thousand generations would require up to twenty-five thousand years of promise-keeping! So utterly reliable is God's word. Certainly a number of God's promises came unshakeably true, as the Israelites crossed the Jordan for the hills and pastures of their Fatherland.

We pass over several hundred fairly unfruitful years to the time of Israel's monarchy. King David, well known for his authorship of the Psalms, was, like Abraham, a giant of faith. Something of his love for God and his insistence on truth and right comes out in his writings. Abraham is often referred to in Scripture as "the friend" of God. David was called by the Lord "a man after my own heart". Both epithets mark off these men as exceptional characters.

During the wilderness journey and their subsequent occupation of the land, the Israelites had worshipped God at the Tabernacle, a tent-like portable building. Now the nation was firmly established with a king and a capital at Jerusalem, David felt it would be a nice idea to build for the Lord a more permanent sanctuary of stone. When he suggested this to the prophet Nathan, he was disappointed to be told that the project must be shelved until his son came to the throne. However, said Nathan, the Lord was touched by David's concern for His honour, and in return He proposed a magnificent promise for David and his family, very like the one made with Abraham.

The Covenant with King David

In fact it was so solemn a promise, it is referred to as the Covenant with David. And like the promises to Abraham, it combined plain, practical ideas with cryptic statements that must have puzzled David for years. Here is a sample, taken from 2 Samuel 7: "The Lord declares to you", said Nathan, "that the Lord will make you a house" (v.11). It sounded an odd statement, for it was David who wanted to build God a house. But as the prophet continued, it became obvious that the Lord had in mind a different kind of house: "I will raise up your son after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever" (vv. 12,13).

So far, the promise could fit neatly David's son Solomon, who succeeded him on the throne. But God continued, "I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (v.14). Here was a poser. How could the person referred to be David's son, and yet have God for his father as well? It was very mysterious. The climax of the promise came at the end: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever" (v. 16). The house of David was clearly his family or dynasty. We use the same term in history lessons when we speak of the House of York or the House of Plantagenet.

But what a promise -- to have your family line guaranteed a continuous succession to the throne, not just for a hundred years, but for ever! It was a covenant David rejoiced over for the rest of his life: "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord", he writes in Psalm 89. "I will not violate my covenant", God had insisted, "Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His line shall endure for ever, his throne as long as the sun before me" (vv. 1,34-36).

Once more, God had made a promise which, upon His honour, He could not break, and King David, like Abraham, died believing the eternal God would keep His word.

We must press on quickly now through five more centuries, pursuing the drama of what the Apostle Peter calls in the Authorised Version "God's exceeding great and precious promises" (2 Peter 1:4). It is a trail with a happy ending.

The Restoration Promises

David's son Solomon did build a house for God, a magnificent and costly Temple at Jerusalem that stood for hundreds of years. When he died, a tragic civil war divided the country, and the nation was ruled by two rival kings. As time passed, the spiritual vigour of the people declined and God's laws fell into disuse. There were revivals from time to time, mainly amongst the tribes of Judah and Benjamin who retained the Temple and the capital Jerusalem. But slowly moral standards declined, and God's patience became exhausted. Israel's right to the land depended on their obedience to Him, and they had flagrantly broken the terms of their tenancy. This was the era of the Prophets. True to His name, the Lord showed infinite compassion,

raising up special messengers, inspired by the Holy Spirit to warn the people that the way they were following would lead to disaster.

The warnings had no effect. Eventually the ten tribes were invaded by the Assyrians and deported bodily from the land, to be followed a century and a half later by the two tribes, taken away to Babylon. It really looked like the end. As the beautiful Temple was burnt and the palace destroyed, Zedekiah, the nineteenth king to sit on David's throne, was blinded and taken captive, never to return. What of the promise to Abraham that his descendants would possess the land? And how about the covenant to David that there would always be someone to occupy his throne? Had God forgotten His promise? Or worse, was He less powerful than the heathen gods of Babylon? The people badly needed guidance.

In that very hour, when Israel's light seemed to be flickering out, astonishingly, there came the most tremendous outpouring of Promises from the lips of the Prophets. They insisted the calamities that had come were not accidental, but were the judgement of God. There could be no escape from punishment. But still, in the future, there was hope. The nation would not die out. There would be a king to reign on David's throne. And one day God would send them Messiah, a mighty deliverer, who would bring them back to the land they had left and rule over them in peace for ever.

Isaiah's Prophecy of Messiah

Here are just three extracts from the promises God made in this period. They are taken from three different prophets.

Isaiah lived before the end, and could see the writing on the wall. "Ah, sinful nation," he cries in his opening chapter, "a people laden with iniquity . . . they have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel. The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it" (1:4-6). Yet entire chapters of his book are alive with praise and thankfulness at God's coming deliverance. "Shake yourself from the dust, arise, O captive Jerusalem break forth into singing you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem", he exults. He sees the people trodden down by vengeful nations, when God appears in fire and earthquake to deliver them: "For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire". For, he continues, "to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore" (9:5-7).

He pictures in the end this Davidic king presiding over a worldwide empire where all nations live at peace, and God's laws go out from Jerusalem: "It shall come to pass in the latter days", he begins, ". . . out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples . . . nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (2:2-4). These prophecies would have seemed impossible to a Jew living at the time of the fall of Jerusalem. Yet the God who keeps His word for a thousand generations was promising them.

Jeremiah and the New Covenant

Our second prophet actually lived through the siege of Jerusalem. He saw the city ransacked and its people taken away. Yet God made Jeremiah some of the clearest prophecies in the Old Testament about the future of His people: "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."

The old covenant was the one made with the nation at Sinai, which gave them the Promised Land, on conditions. This New covenant replaces the Old: "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people". Instead of His commandments remaining on tablets of stone, they would be taken into men's hearts. The people would all know the Lord, he continued, and God would forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

If it all sounded very unlikely to Jeremiah's readers, setting off for captivity in Babylon, he could cheer them with these words: "Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger . . . I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety . . . I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul" (32:37,41). Time and again Jeremiah repeated this promise of the regathering. And if their faith was shattered at the sight of their king being taken from them, he even had a special reassurance about the throne: "I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. . . For thus says the Lord, David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel" (33:15,17).

"Justice and righteousness"-those words echo the statement we found in Isaiah one hundred and fifty years earlier. Both prophets pictured the line of David as a family tree, from which an illustrious branch would arise, a unique being who would occupy the throne for ever. Sure and firm, too, in both prophets is the Abrahamic promise of the Land, assured to the people in spite of their scattering.

Ezekiel's Vision of the Kingdom

Finally, we come to Ezekiel, who lived later still. Ezekiel spent all his life as a prisoner of war in Babylon. He, too, had the most wonderful vision of peace and blessing for Abraham's people: "I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land", he prophesies; "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses." God was going to forgive and forget the misdeeds of the nation (Ezekiel 36:24,25). Like the earlier prophets, Ezekiel sings of the coming of the king and the promises to Israel's ancestors: "They shall dwell in the land where your fathers dwelt that I gave to my servant Jacob; they and their children and their children's children shall dwell there for ever; and David my servant shall be their prince forever" (37:25). There is no mistaking the clarity and vigor of God's guarantee to His people. However dark the present, they had something very positive to look forward to.

The Israelites were held captive in Babylon for three quarters of a century. A revolution followed, in which the Babylonian empire was taken over by the Persians. In the first year of his reign the new king declared an amnesty, permitting any members of the tribe of Judah who wished to, to return to their own country. Many did, and began the heartbreaking task of rebuilding their overgrown ruined estates.

Perhaps they wondered hopefully whether the Messiah would appear to make life easier for them. They had, it was true, gone back from captivity, but life was not the same. They groaned under the taxes of their imperial masters, and as the years passed they were invaded and crushed by armies from north and south. The great majority of their brethren remained in dispersion, wandering farther away among the nations. And no king sat on David's throne.

The Coming of Jesus

A young girl from the tribe of Judah, engaged but not married, sat in her house at Nazareth. Surprised by a knock at the door, she found herself speaking to a visitor who claimed to be an angel of the Lord: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son", he told her, "and you shall call his name Jesus". So far, the words are familiar from Christmas plays. But ponder now the

remainder of the message: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High", said the angel, "and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33). There is no mistaking, is there, the link with those Old Testament promises? "The power of the Most High will overshadow you", he concluded, "therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (v.35).

At a stroke, the mystery of centuries was becoming plain. Mary's son Jesus was a unique being, the only one capable of fulfilling the covenant with David. He was descended from David, through her own family tree. He was at the same time Son of God: "I will be his father", God had said to David, and the power of God's Holy Spirit brought Jesus to birth.

Further, Jeremiah had promised, "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of David", and the angel said Jesus would reign for ever, on that very throne. Finally, because David was descended from Abraham, Jesus stood in the line of Abraham's promise of a blessing to all nations, as well: "He will save his people from their sins", was the angel's explanation of his name (Matthew 1:21), and what greater blessing could there be than to remove the terrible burden of human sin that brings sorrow, disease and death to all men? So, quietly and without drama, the one on whom Israel and the world depended was born in a stable in the city of his ancestor David.

Christ's Mission

When Jesus began his public preaching at the age of thirty, there was great expectation in Judah. His followers called him Messiah, or Anointed-the coming Deliverer. The title 'Christos' or Christ in the Greek of the New Testament is exactly equivalent to the Old Testament 'Messiah'. Everyone expected Jesus would challenge Rome, set Israel free from her enemies, and take up the throne. His extraordinary miracles of healing enhanced this conviction that he was sent from God.

The people were doomed to disappointment. Jesus remained a wandering teacher and spurned political ties. His enemies, the leaders of Israel, jealous of his popularity, successfully plotted his death. After three years, in which he transformed the lives of thousands by his example and his quiet teaching, he was betrayed and executed as a criminal. The Jews remained in dispersion, ungathered. David's throne stayed empty. Even the body of Jesus disappeared. It looked as though, yet again, God had made a promise, and it had all come to nothing. For six long weeks, Jerusalem slept.

The Mystery Revealed

Suddenly, the capital was alive with amazing news. Jesus' disciples, filled with the same Holy Spirit power that had inspired the ancient prophets, were proclaiming that Jesus was alive again. They had seen him, eaten with him, and watched him ascend to heaven. More startling still, they were able to show from those Old Testament Scriptures that everyone thought they knew so well, that the Messiah was always intended to die on the cross, and rise again. Nothing had gone wrong. It was all God's plan.

"What God foretold by the mouth of all his prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he hath thus fulfilled", declared Peter the fisherman. "Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets" (Acts 3:18-21).

All had become clear again. Jesus was the Saviour of Israel and the nations of the world, just as the prophets had said. But he had to come twice. He had to come once to die as the sin bearer, the Deliverer from the great enemy of sin and eternal death. He had to come a second time, to save his people from their oppressors and reign over the world. He had ascended to God's right

hand, but not for ever. He is there "UNTIL" the time for establishing all that God had spoken by the prophets.

With this key, the prophecies of the Messiah open up like a treasure chest. Passages where Messiah's reigning in victory seem clouded by descriptions of his death become instantly plain. Look, for example, at Isaiah chapters 52 and 53. Chapter 52 describes the joy of Jerusalem as she is delivered by Messiah from her captors.

Chapter 53 predicts in painful detail his humiliating crucifixion. Seen as the two Comings, both chapters make perfect sense.

Or Psalm 2: viewed with one pair of spectacles this passage tells of Messiah's enemies combining to put him to death. Change the focal length, and you have Messiah once more surrounded by enemies, but this time victorious, as his Father decrees: "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill" (v.6). We could go on, but you will find great pleasure in unraveling the mystery for yourself. That is exactly what the New Testament apostles called the good news -- a mystery revealed, a secret, to which they now had the key.

The Need for Christ's Second Coming

There was another mystery, too, that the apostles were able to solve. You may already be asking the obvious question-Why did God arrange two comings? Why did not Jesus rise from the dead with immortal power, to reign at once on the throne of David? Why should there be a long gap of nearly two thousand years? The answer to that question is particularly important to you and me, and it occupies much of the New Testament.

Let us read the Apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 3. "The mystery", he says, "was made known to me by revelation. It was not made known", he continued, "to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (vv. 3,5,6).

These are wonderful words. A Gentile is someone who is not a Jew. For centuries, God's word and His promises belonged to the people of God. Now, says the Apostle, the Gospel net has been thrown wider to include people from other nations. Those great promises of the Kingdom when Messiah reigns can be ours, too. "At one time," he writes, "you Gentiles in the flesh . . . were 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" (Ephesians 2:11-13).

Did you notice how this passage illuminates our theme, the Hope of Israel? "Having no hope" was how the Ephesian believers used to be. It is how millions are today, and how you may feel at this moment. But they had learned about the "covenants of promise" which we have been studying. They had seized the Hope enshrined in those promises. Through the blood of Christ, they had been brought near.

A Covenant Sealed with Blood

The best of the covenants of promise God made still lie in the future. We do not know precisely when they are going to be fulfilled. The majority of people who have believed and hoped in God's promises are already in the grave, and there is a chance we shall die, too, before Jesus comes again. Yet the glorious truth is that even if we die, we can still taste the joy of God's Kingdom. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his death cell, we can be brought back to life again, to receive "the crown of righteousness which the Lord", he said, "will award me on that Day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing".

When the Messiah comes he will raise from the dead all those who have died in faith, and give them a strong, immortal body like his own. Abraham will certainly be there, and so will David, and Paul. We can be there, too.

And it is all possible through the blood of Christ, which has brought us near to God. For whether we are Jews or Gentiles, we are sinners. We break God's laws, and deserve nothing but death. Jesus' death, the offering of his sinless self in sacrifice, broke the power of the grave for all who join themselves to him. Thus the two Comings are inseparably linked. The cross precedes the crown; the suffering servant becomes the king of kings. And the same land where Abraham waited in his tent and Jesus walked with the good news of the Kingdom, is given to them both with their family around them, to enjoy for ever.

When Peter stood up in Jerusalem at Pentecost and began to explain the mystery of the two comings, he had an urgent message for the people. Let us look at his words again: "Repent therefore", he cried, "and turn again" (Acts 3:1 9). He was exhorting his hearers to prepare themselves for the coming of Jesus by changing their lives, turning round and going a different way. Earlier that day when the crowds had asked him what they should do, he said to them: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (2:38).

Heirs of the Promise

Once you begin to appreciate the Hope God sets before us in His Word, you want to know how to lay hold of it. You realize as you read more, that He sets a standard for men to follow which you have not begun to reach. If you really want to please God, you will feel the need, like those men in Jerusalem, to have your conscience made clean. The way God has prescribed for us is to be baptized into the Lord Jesus, symbolically washing away in the waters our old life, and starting again as if we were newly born, members of God's holy people. Then, the New Testament insists, we shall be heirs of those promises of the Kingdom of God: "For in Christ Jesus", writes Paul, "you are all sons of God, through faith" (Galatians 3:26).

Imagine that! What a privilege, to be called sons and daughters of God! "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (vv. 27-29). All that Jesus inherits -- the land, the throne, the blessing--all will be ours. How exciting and moving it is, to think what God offers us. It is as if we are being introduced already to the new covenant God will make with His people. God's law is written on our heart, our sins are washed away, and we are enrolled for a place in that age when war and famine, sin and sorrow will be banished for ever from the earth.

Paul uses another figure in Romans 11. He says we Gentile believers are like sprigs of a wild olive tree that have been picked up by God the gardener and grafted into the stem of the olive tree of Israel. We share the rich sap that keeps the life flowing, and we will be there in the time of harvest. "I want you to understand this mystery brethren", he says, as he explains the long gap between the two Comings: "a hardening has come upon part of Israel". He means that only a minority of the Jewish people accepted the good news Jesus and the apostles brought; the hearts of the rest were too hard for the good seed of the Kingdom to grow.

But Israel's hardness of heart is not for ever. "Until the full number of the Gentiles come in", he continues, "and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written" -- and he quotes from one of the 'Messiah' passages in Isaiah -- "the Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob. And this will be my covenant with them", he adds, repeating the passage we read from Jeremiah 33, "when I take away their sins" (Romans 11:24-27).

Notice the time period--when the full number of the Gentiles has come in. It has not come in yet. God is still calling us to come into His family. But one day, soon, perhaps very soon, the

door will be shut. The Lord Jesus will be here with power to rule over the nations, and bring men to judgement for despising God's laws.

Signs that God has not Forgotten

How do we know the coming of Jesus is very near? There is one simple answer. Look at Israel! Scattered through the nations for centuries, they have never died out, as they cannot, if God is to keep His word. In our own generation, they have started to go back to their land. In 1967 they took back Jerusalem, or Zion, their ancient capital. And now their enemies are gathering against them. The scene is set for the Deliverer to come to his throne, for God to set His king upon His holy hill of Zion. The signs are all there to strengthen our faith. The God who keeps His covenants to a thousand generations is unbaring His arm again.

Let us finish with a lovely passage, which sums up this great Hope of Israel that we have been thinking about so long. We said it can give us comfort, direction, and courage to face all the storms of life. This is just how the Apostle puts it in the Letter to the Hebrews: "When God made a promise to Abraham . . . he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you'"

Sure as an Anchor

"So," he continues, "when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we. . . might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us" (Hebrews 6:13-18). Two unchangeable things: we have God's Word, which alone should be enough. To make doubly sure, He has given us an oath as well. It means we just cannot doubt the promise will come true. "We have this", he concludes, "as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (v.19).

Men and women who believe in God's promises are as safe as a ship, tossed on a dark night in an angry sea, secured from all danger by the strong anchor that bites deep into the rock below. Won't you make this hope your own?

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Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

