

THE ETERNAL GOSPEL IN THE LIGHT OF PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

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And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and people. (Rev. 14:6)

Introduction

The doctrine of personal salvation is not merely a phenomenon of the New Testament. The Old Testament saint, as well, experienced regeneration. Furthermore, certain principles of regeneration were revealed in each of the eight Old Testament covenants. It is consistent with the hermeneutical principles of progressive revelation to expect in the book of Genesis an embryonic revelation of God's provision for man's salvation that anticipates the full revelation of that doctrine in the New Testament. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect this embryonic revelation to appear in a covenant contemporaneous with man's creation in the Garden.

Revelation during the Edenic Covenant Showed that Eternal Life Was Potentially Available by Means of the Divinely Designated Tree of Life

That there was an Edenic covenant is supported by the testimony of Scripture, ("But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant," Hos. 6:7). And, by the lack of explanation surrounding it, Genesis 6:18 ("But I will establish my covenant with you [Noah]") implies that the covenant concept was not introduced there for the first time. Although not explicitly called a covenant, God's declaration in Genesis 2:9-17 has all the essential features of a covenant. Also, if Christ, the second Man, the Lord from heaven, was the head of a covenant ("This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" Luke 22:20), it follows that Adam, the first man, likewise was the head of a covenant (Rom. 5:12-21).

Under the Edenic covenant man was given the potential of obtaining eternal life by partaking of the tree of life. In the phrase "tree of life," *life* is a produce genitive, and the words mean literally "tree producing life." This life was not produced in any magical manner. Rather, the tree produced life because it was Divinely designated as the instrument by which, upon evidence of obedience to His Divine Word, man was to partake of God's life.

Receiving eternal life by eating of the fruit of the tree was only potential, however, and was never actually realized by man. That Adam had the potentiality of obtaining eternal life under the Edenic covenant is evident in that he was allowed to eat of every tree, including, of course, the tree of life ("From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," Gen. 2:16, 17). Again, from God's explicit statement after the fall ("lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" 3:22, KJV), it is plain that Adam could have gained eternal life by partaking of the tree. Obviously Adam had not partaken of the tree; otherwise he would never have died. On the other hand, had Adam successfully demonstrated his faith by obedience to the Word of God and partaken of the tree, then God would have given him eternal life. Keil and Delitzsch agree with this

conclusion: "Had he [Adam] continued in fellowship with God by obedience to the command of God, he might have eaten of it, for he was created for eternal life."¹ But this potentiality of Adam's obtaining eternal life under the Edenic covenant never attained actuality. He rebelled against the Most High and thus became a sinner.

Revelation during the Adamic Covenant Sets Forth God's Provision for Salvation by His Slaying a Lamb to Make "Garments of Skin for Adam and His Wife, and He Clothed Them," (3:21)

Adam's sin caused immediate changes. He was driven from the "tree producing life," which was then protected by a Cherub and a flaming sword.² The consequence of this Divine action was the barring of man from eternal life and also from the throne of God. If access to eternal life, fellowship, and rulership in the eternal Kingdom of God (*cf.* Gen. 1:26) are to be restored to Adam and his descendants, something must be provided to ransom them from sin. Thus the Adamic covenant revealed God's provision for salvation.

In the slaying of the lamb, God initiated the Adamic covenant ("The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" Gen. 3:21; See 3:14-24) and, Keil believes, "laid the foundation for the sacrifices."³ Hofman, Dreschler, and Delitzsch, however, rightly go further to find in "this clothing...a sacramental sign of grace, a type of the death of Christ, and of the being clothed with the holy righteousness of the God-man."⁴

This Divine action must have symbolized to Adam and Eve certain salvation truths. First, the need for substitutionary atonement was indicated in that an innocent victim was slain instead of the guilty pair. The imputation of sin was the second truth symbolized. Adam was supposed to have died in the day that he disobeyed the Divine command (Gen. 2:17). However the death of the covenant animal symbolized the death of the parties to that covenant. Hence, by Adam's assenting to the covenant stipulations, God was able to continue with the covenant ceremony and thus impute Adam's sin to the innocent victim. Third, the death of the covenant lamb meant to the offending parties propitiation—the satisfaction of God's outraged holiness—by the imputation of Adam's sin to the lamb. Fourth, Adam's justification was symbolized when God covered him with the skin coat of the animal. The result therefore of the provision for salvation in the Adamic covenant was that Adam was declared righteous upon the basis of a substitutionary sacrifice being slain which caused God, even in all His holiness, to look upon Adam and Eve favorably.

In the Adamic covenant, there is an anticipation of the principle revealed in the Abrahamic covenant of salvation by faith. Following the sacrifice of the animal, Adam immediately turns to his wife and calls her *Chawwah*, "life." Adam recognized that upon the basis of the shed blood of a substitutionary sacrifice mankind, otherwise doomed to die, would be allowed to live. Thus the Adamic race was prepared for the platform and perpetuation of its salvation to be revealed in the Noachian covenant (Gen. 9:8-17).

¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentaries on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959). I, 107.

² The Cherubim seem to denote the presence and throne of God, *cf.* John Peter Lange, *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, [n. d.]), I, 242.

³ Keil and Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, I, 106.

⁴ Lange, *op. cit.*, I, 240.

The Noachian Covenant Revealed that the Basis, or Platform, for Receiving Salvation is God's Grace

The history of God's dealing with Noah begins with these words: "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen. 6:8 KJV). Grace is a translation of *chan* and generally means favor or good will. The Old Testament often speaks of finding favor in the eyes of God, or man, with the connotation being of a bestowal of favors or blessings (Gen. 6:8; 19:19; 33:15). The fundamental idea according to Berkhof, "is that the blessings graciously bestowed are freely given, and not in consideration of any claim or merit."⁵ He adds, "It is God's free, sovereign, undeserved favor or love to man, in his state of sin and guilt, which manifests itself in the forgiveness of sin and deliverance from its penalty."⁶ The flood was a manifestation of the wrath of God against the wickedness of man. Noah escaped this deserved wrath, not necessarily because he walked with God, but because of God's grace upon him. The New Testament analogy to this saving grace is that stated in Ephesians 2:8, "for by grace are ye saved through faith." Clearly, the salvation of the Old Testament believer, as well as the New Testament saint, is based on the undeserved favor of God.

Now, this is not an attempt to discuss what is commonly called "eternal security" or "the perseverance of the saints." Whether or not Noah could have freely left the covenant that he voluntarily entered is outside the scope of this investigation. But from the Divine viewpoint the Noachian covenant was eternal. To show that He would perpetuate the covenant of salvation established with Noah, God made its unbreakable character a sign that certain eschatological events would happen. In Isaiah, He declares that the regathering of Israel is as sure as is the continuation of His promise to Noah that the earth will no more be destroyed with water (Is. 54:1-10). Again, He declares in Jeremiah that the Davidic covenant is as sure of fulfillment as His promise to Noah that neither day and night nor seed time and harvest will cease while the earth remains (Jer. 33:20-21, 25-26; cf. Gen. 8:22). By these words God shows that on His part He intends to perpetuate forever His covenant with Noah, which gave to sinful man salvation upon the basis of Divine grace. As the believer therefore witnesses the succession of night and day and of the seasons, his heart should swell with a mighty anthem of praise. For as often as he sees these daily and seasonal phenomena, he may be assured that God's eternal covenant of salvation established with him is still in force.

The Abrahamic Covenant Revealed that Faith is the Principle by which God Bestows Salvation

The next covenant was the Abrahamic covenant which reveals the principle by which man appropriates salvation ("Then he believed the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" Gen. 15:6). Just as in the New Testament faith is never spoken of as a past act but as a belief continuously in manifestation (John 3:14-18), so Abraham's faith is acknowledged by Scripture to be a constant condition. The word which designates the faith of Abraham is expressed by *ha'amin*, the *Hiph'il* of *'amin*, meaning, "to trust, believe." The significance of the *Hiph'il* is expressed by Gesenius, who says that *'amin* is one of the words "which express in *Hiph'il* the entering into a certain condition and

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1941), p. 427.

⁶ *Ibid.*

further, the being in the same."⁷ Moreover, just as the object of Abraham's justifying faith was God's promise of the coming, to be miraculously born, son Isaac (Gen. 15:1-6),⁸ so the believer's faith today rests in the miraculously born Son of God, (Matt. 1:23; John 3:16).

Such faith God counts for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). God treated Abraham as a righteous man and, indeed, formed a living fellowship with him. This same righteousness may be imputed to anyone who will believe in the miraculously born Son of God, Jesus Christ ("If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" Rom. 10:9).

The Mosaic Covenant Revealed the Prototypes of Salvation which Were "Acted Prediction of Calvary"

Now that the potentiality, provision, platform and perpetuation, and principle of salvation had been revealed to the Adamic race, the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 20-24) with its prototypes of salvation was given to show men their need of justification and thus lead them to Christ (Luke 24:44). But how could the law, given approximately 1,400 years before Christ, lead men to a saving knowledge of Him at that time? The New Testament teaches that the Mosaic ordinances were symbols teaching spiritual truth to Israel and in turn serving as a visible manifestation of the people's faith in Yahweh. The ceremonial law was symbolical of Israel's sanctification and of the substitutionary way of salvation; it spoke of Christ. Payne concludes, "God was providing acted predictions of Calvary when He revealed the ceremonial law."⁹ Thus in placing these symbols before the repentant sinner, the law actually led him to Christ and, consequently, to an experience of salvation in Him.

Especially was the tabernacle, with all of its peculiar features, symbolic of spiritual truth. Generally, of course, it witnessed to Yahweh's intention to dwell among Israel as her God. But the materials, the fittings, and the furniture all signified specific truths.¹⁰ The brazen altar where the sacrificial animals were offered testified that God could be approached only by the way of a sacrifice, which the New Testament sees fulfilled in the substitutionary death of Christ (Heb. 8:2, 3, 9-12). The laver of water symbolized the necessity of purity for the one approaching God and typified the washing of regeneration and sanctification in Christ (Ex. 30:21; Titus 3:5; Heb. 9:10). The consecrated bread of the Presence proclaimed Israel's re-established, harmonious communion with Yahweh and, likewise, His fellowship with believers throughout the ages (Lev. 24:4-9; cf. Ex. 24:11; Luke 14:15). The lampstand taught Israel that she was to shine forth in her testimony with all the perfection of one wholly dedicated to God and moreover prefigures the consecrated Christian's witness to the world (Lev. 24:3; Matt. 5:14-16). The altar of incense was both the symbol and type of the believer's communion with God in prayer (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:4). And the mercy seat where the sacrificial blood was sprinkled

⁷ E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley (eds.), *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 145.

⁸ Cf. Gen. 15:1-6 with Rom. 4:18-22.

⁹ J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 352.

¹⁰ J. Barton Payne says, "Hebrews 8:5; 9:5 demonstrate that the major parts of the tabernacle did have divinely intended meaning" *ibid.*, 358.

symbolized the grace of God intervening between the demand of His holy nature for justice and the sinful conduct of man in the conflict, so vividly illuminated by the broken law underneath. The blood sprinkled on the mercy seat further typified the atoning blood of Christ which turns away from Christians the deserved wrath of God and cleanses repenting and confessing believers from their sins ("Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus," Rom. 3:24; *cf.* Heb. 9:24). Realizing the meaning of these symbols, the author of Hebrews could well say of the Jews: "For unto us was the gospel preached as well as unto them" (Heb. 4:2).

Revelation in the Deuteronomic Covenant Set Forth God's Means to Persuade His People to Remain Steadfast in Salvation

After being led to Christ through the law, man needed an inducement to remain steadfast in Him. This God provided in the Deuteronomic covenant (Deut. 1-34). In persuading the people to remain steadfast in salvation, God revealed two truths. The first was that He saved Israel because He loved them. Of course, God had always loved man. But He revealed His love here in order to incite Israel to remain constant in salvation. Moved by love, God had redeemed them from the bondage of Egypt and of sin; moved by love, He had blessed them materially (Deut. 4:37; 7:8, 13). Moreover, out of love for Israel, God preferred them above other nations, caused them to be blessed instead of cursed, and gave to them His word (Deut. 10:15; 23:5; 33:3). Such revelation of Divine love was intended to incite in Israel's heart a like response: "That thou mayest love the Lord thy God" (Deut. 30:20).

The second truth revealed in the Deuteronomic covenant was the inwardness of salvation. Although salvation had always been of the heart, it was not clearly revealed until the Deuteronomic covenant. Here, God says, "But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it" (Deut. 30:14). It is significant that Paul quoting this very verse declares it to be the same word of faith that he preached ("But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart'—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching" Rom. 10:8).

Revelation during the Davidic Covenant Pointed Out, in Seed Form, the Person Who Was to Bring Salvation

Following the disclosure of the facts of salvation in the preceding covenants, the Davidic covenant revealed the Person Who was to bring this salvation (II Sam. 7; I Chron. 17; Ps. 89, 132). Undoubtedly the language of the Davidic covenant points beyond the natural seed of David to its ultimate fulfillment in Messiah. And to this the Old Testament prophets agree. Isaiah says of Messiah, "There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore (Is. 9:7; *cf.* Is. 16:5; Jer. 23:5; 33:15)."

Indeed, several prophets call Messiah by the name David (Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 34:23-25; Hos. 3:5). And Gabriel, in his announcement to Mary, expressly designated the covenant as finding its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ: "the Lord God shall give Him the throne of his father David; And He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Not only was Messiah to sit upon the throne of His father David but He was also destined to bring salvation, both physical and spiritual, to His people. Jeremiah prophesies:

I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me. (33:7-8; cf. 33:15-17; Is. 54:14; Zech. 3:8-9).

The New Testament agrees. Spirit-filled Zacharias prophesied of the Holy Babe that God had raised up from the family of David a horn of salvation to give deliverance from the enemies of Israel, and to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the forgiving of their sins (Luke 1:66-79). Messiah was also to bring light to the Gentiles (Is. 9:1-2). Sitting upon the throne of David, He would provide physical and spiritual deliverance for both Jew and Gentile.

He was by nature fit to bring salvation. Being of the seed of David, He was Man as well as the mighty God, the everlasting Father (Is. 9:6). The Holy Spirit, even "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and strength, the Spirit of Knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Is. 11:2), was to rest upon Him. As the God-man filled with the Holy Spirit, He would preach good tidings unto the meek (Is. 61:1) and, finally, lay down His life as a vicarious sacrifice for the sins of mankind (Is. 53). Following His resurrection from the dead (Is. 53:10), He will appear with pierced hands unto His people (Ps. 22:16; Zech. 12:10), who will have found a fountain for cleansing from sin and uncleanness (Zech. 13:1).

Revelation Concerning the New Covenant Was Prophesied by Jeremiah and Later Ratified by the Lord Jesus Christ at the Cross

The last covenant is the new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah ("Behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" 31:31; cf. 31:32-34) but not inaugurated until the death of Christ ("This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" Luke 22:20; cf. Heb. 12:24; 13:20). It is new in the sense that the symbols of the covenants in earlier revelation have given way to the thing symbolized in later revelation. That is, although the principles are the same in both the Old and New Testaments, the mode of expression has changed, and each earlier principle has been revealed later in clearer detail. Thus the **potentiality of salvation** is reasserted in the words of John: "and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17, KJV). John also declares the **provision for salvation**: "for thou was slain and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood" (Rev. 5:9, KJV). The **platform or basis of salvation** is still the same: "for by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:8), and its eternal perpetuation has been promised. "He who hears My word, and believes on Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment" (John 5:24). The **principle of receiving salvation** is to "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The book of Hebrews shows that the **prototypes of salvation** have given way to the Person and work of Jesus Christ, the One Whose Person and work were previously typified in the "predicted prophecy" of the ceremonial law. The **persuasion for the Christian to keep the new covenant** includes chastisement, "FOR WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES" (Heb. 12:6); loss of rewards, "If any man's work is burned up; he will suffer loss" (I Cor. 3:15); and rulership in God's eternal Kingdom, "He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne" (Rev. 3:21). And the **Person**

bringing salvation to a lost world is declared to be the Son of God Who became flesh in order that He might be the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world (John 1:1, 14, 29). Hence, an entire panorama of the principles of salvation of all the Old Testament covenants is set forth in the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Concerning the progressive revelation of the eternal Gospel, Geerhardus Vos comments,

The Gospel of paradise is such a germ in which the Gospel of Paul is potentially present; and the Gospel of Abraham, of Moses, of David, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, are all expansions of this original message of salvation, each pointing toward the next stage of growth, and bringing the Gospel idea one step nearer to its full realization....So dispensation grows out of dispensation and the newest is but the fullest expanded flower of the oldest.¹¹

It may be concluded then, that salvation in the Old Testament was by grace through faith in the atoning blood of the sacrifice as the symbol of Christ's sacrifice. By this faith the Old Testament saint was justified (Gen. 15:6; Habbakuk 2:4) and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Ex. 35:31; Deut. 34:9; Judges 3:10). The evidence of the believer's faith was the same then as today: obedience to the Word of God (James 2:20-26).

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This article is a revised and condensed form of a paper written for the class, Advanced Biblical Theology, c. 1963.

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¹¹ Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," www.BSMI.org, 7.