

Sabbath School Today **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

The Book of Acts **Lesson 4. The First Church Leaders**

When we were little tikes in Sabbath School, we used to have a saying which we thought was funny. The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection from the dead, that's why they were called "sad-you-sees." Why didn't they believe in the resurrection? Because they didn't believe in God's promise, His everlasting covenant.

The resurrection was clearly taught in the experience of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. When Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, he started his powerful speech with God's promise to Abraham and continued throughout his lengthy recorded sermon with allusions to the covenant (Acts 7). Our Sabbath school lesson (page 33) asserts Stephen's sermon was a "covenant lawsuit" prosecuted before the Sanhedrin.

Stephen's allusion to God's resurrection promise to Abraham did not go over the heads of the Sanhedrin. For example, Stephen commenced with God's command to Abraham to "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall show thee" (Acts 7:3). Abraham journeyed with his family and brought his deceased father into Canaan and God gave "him *none inheritance in it*, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet He promised that He would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed [Descendant, Christ] after him" (vs. 5). Abraham owned nothing in Canaan, not even a burial plot for his father. It's obvious from these words that God never intended to give Abraham just a tiny little space in the Middle East. God promised the whole earth in righteousness to Abraham and his descendants.

When Abraham died, he still did not own Palestine, but he believed God's promise: "By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a *strange country*, dwelling in tabernacles [nomadic tents] with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:9-10). "These *all died in faith, not having received the promises*, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were *strangers and pilgrims on the earth*" (vs. 13).

E. J. Waggoner remarks on this passage that the patriarchs "plainly declared, says Paul, that they looked for a country, and we have already learned that that country was the whole earth; and since they were not disappointed because the country was not given to them in their lifetime, it is evident that they understood the promise to embrace the resurrection from the dead." [1]

Paul testified of his faith before King Agrippa: “And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the *promise made of God* unto our fathers; unto which *promise* our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, *hope to come*. For which hope’s sake, King Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews. Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should *raise the dead*?” (Acts 26:6-8).

God’s promise contains the hope of the resurrection in order to dwell in the new earth in righteousness. “Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13).

But all of this is so much familiar ground. It was when Stephen spoke of “the coming of the *Just One*” (Acts 7:52), that the Sanhedrin lost it and murdered Stephen. Stephen virtually said that God did not dwell in their temple (vss. 47-49). It was anything but righteous. God’s covenant with Abraham promised him a coming “Seed” [vs. 5, Descendant] in Whom the Holy Spirit manifest full and complete righteousness. God dwelt in “the Just [righteous] One” who the Pharisees and Sadducees murdered (vs. 52).

God gave Abraham “the covenant of circumcision” (vs. 8) because he was willing to receive the Holy Spirit’s gift of “righteousness by faith” in his heart. It was this gift of God’s Spirit which the teachers of the law refused at Christ’s coming and thus committed the unpardonable sin and murdered the righteous One. Because they refused to believe God’s covenant they did not recognize the promised “Seed”—their Messiah. Thus they were “uncircumcised in heart” and rejected their righteousness even though they claimed to “have received the law” (vs. 53). In resisting the Holy Spirit and rejecting their Messiah they manifest Old Covenant unbelief in their hearts.

“They were cut to the heart” (vs. 54). In other words, the Holy Spirit got through, but it did them no good. They rejected the message and the messenger.

When Stephen testified, “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (vs. 56), he virtually was saying, “I see the *resurrected One* standing vindicated at God’s right hand,” and that sealed Stephen’s fate.

One of the key themes of the 1888 message is the good news of God’s everlasting covenant. The New Covenant was God’s one-sided promise to Abraham and his descendants to give them the entire earth made new for “an everlasting possession” and the righteousness necessary to inherit it “in Christ.” The Old Covenant was the promise of the people at Mount Sinai to perform faithful obedience: “All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:8). That Old Covenant became the fundamental thesis of Israel’s understanding of God’s truth which culminated eventually in the murder of their Messiah. Thus Israel’s history demonstrates that the covenant “from mount Sinai ... gendereth to bondage” (Gal. 4:24).

All efforts to fasten Old Covenant “promises” on children and youth are bound to “gender to bondage” in their spiritual experience. Ellen White says, “The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you.” [2] God doesn’t ask us to promise Him righteousness; He asks us to believe His promises to us.

—Paul E. Penno

Endnotes:

[1] E. J. Waggoner, “The Hope of the Promise,” *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times*, vol. 4, no. 10 (May 15, 1889), p. 154.

[2] Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

https://youtu.be/dGK6ZcX_5KI

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