**GOSPEL AND KINGDOM SERIES**

**Part 5 THE KINGDOM IN ISRAEL’S HISTORY – ABRAHAM TO SINAI**

Israel’s history was not a series of random events: it was governed by the purpose of God. The unique feature of Israel’s history was that its purpose involved both revelation of salvation and the way of salvation. Because salvation’s purpose is to bring sinners into the Kingdom of God, any study of the Kingdom will entail ‘salvation history.’

**Abraham and the patriarchs – the Kingdom promised**

Central to Abraham’s story is God’s covenant promises to him. The narrative of Genesis 12 to 24 is dominated by the promises which convey three primary elements:

1. Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10; 18:18)
2. These descendants would possess the promised land (12:7; 13:14,15; 15:18-21; 17:8)
3. These descendants would be God’s own people (17:2,8; 18:19)

Inherent in the promises was another element: that God would extend the promises to those who were not physically descended from Abraham (12:3; 17:4-6 cf. Romans 4:16-18).

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be God’s people, in God’s place, under God’s rule. An important element in the story is the way that tension develops because Abraham possesses the promise but not the substance of it. He must accept God at His word in faith, while at the same time all the natural elements seem to work against the fulfilment of the promise. Even for Abraham the Kingdom of God must first be received by faith alone (Genesis 15:16).

Having been given promises of descendants and a land, Abraham has to watch his nephew, Lot, choose the best pasture land (13:8-11). The promise of descendants is difficult for two very old people to accept (15:1-5) and the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael shows the stress Abraham and Sarah are under. Isaac, their natural born son, is eventually designated the heir (15:4; 17:19,21; 18:10). The command to sacrifice the boy (22:1,2) showed Abraham believed the specific promises of God, despite the clear challenge to their fulfilment. Again, he was reassured of the promises when his faith stood firm (22:15-18). When Sarah died, Abraham was forced to haggle over the price of her burial plot which he had to buy from his own inheritance (chapter 23).

Isaac’s children, Esau and Jacob, are the objects of God’s sovereign choice. Jacob (the younger) was chosen over Esau for the covenant line (25:19-23). Jacob’s election was not grounded on his merits but the grace of God gradually changed him and he became the father of the covenant people. It would be through Jacob’s family that the Kingdom of God would now be demonstrated.

The rest of the patriarchal story takes us with Joseph and his brothers into Egypt where the next stage of redemption history will be played out.

**Moses and the Exodus – the promise activated**

The Exodus

In time the once favoured sons of Israel (Jacob) were no longer welcome. Sojourn becomes activity enslavement and privilege enslavement. Again, the experience of the recipients of the promises seem to contradict those very promises.

The book of Exodus begins with the story of Moses’ birth, preservation and preparation for his mission. The narrative stresses that it is God who sends Moses to be Israel’s leader (Exodus 2:24; 3:6,13,15,16; 4:5; 6:2-5). It is Moses who hears God’s personal name (6:2-5). This personal name will forever be associated with God’s faithfulness to the covenant. Almost all translations use LORD to translate the Hebrew YHWH (from which the anglicised ‘Jehovah’ is derived).

On the basis of the covenant, God now acts to release the children of Israel. Pharaoh’s refusal to release God’s people is matched with a series of plagues. Each plague is a demonstration of the superiority of God over Egypt’s gods. In the final plague, the firstborn of Egypt are struck down. The sacrifice of a lamb and sprinkling of its blood over the door posts alone protect the occupants as the angel of death passes over. This brings release for Israel.

The way out of Egypt would naturally be the from the delta through the coastal strip to Canaan (their promised land). God instead leads them to the Red Sea which miraculously opened, allowing them to pass through into the wilderness beyond. This gives some insight into why the patriarchs never possessed the land but had to endure servitude in Egypt. Israel had to experience a miraculous redemption from the bondage that held them and kept them out of the Kingdom. The exodus will remain the key model for understanding redemption in the life of Israel, and God will enshrine its remembrance through the annual Passover feast in Israel’s calendar.

The Sinai Covenant

The escaped Israelites came to Sinai where God gave them His Law. The continuity of the declared purpose of God means Sinai must be understood as central to God’s purpose to have a people for Himself on the basis of grace. The call and covenant with Abraham were acts of grace. Abraham’s descendants were promised the kingdom by grace. The miracles of God in Egypt were performed because of the promise to Abraham. The Exodus model became a model of salvation by grace. The Sinai Law was part of God’s program of grace to fulfil His promises to Abraham.

The heart of the Law was the Ten Commandments which were prefaced by ‘*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery’* (20:2). These words govern our understanding of the Sinai Law. What follows was not a program to achieve salvation by works because they had already received that salvation by grace. The Law was given to God’s people after they had already become the people of God by grace. Sinai was dependant on the Abrahamic covenant. It explained how Israel, made God’s people by grace, should now live. The Law lived out would reflect in various ways God’s character. Israel’s faithful response to the character of God would demonstrate that they were His children.

The repeated ‘*I will be your God and you will be my* *people’* (Leviticus 26:12) could only be practically demonstrated by Israel living in accord with God’s character: ‘*You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy’* (Leviticus 19:2). Some laws dealt with the civil life of the nation. Others were ritual requirements which depended on a later fulfilment for their fullest meaning. The food laws were not only for the nation’s health. They reflected the unique relationship Israel held as God’s holy people, separated from all other allegiances and separated unto their God.

The tabernacle became the dwelling place of God in the very midst of His people (29:45). The exacting specifications (chapters 25-31) left no room for the nation to independently determine how God was to be worshipped or their sin atoned for. Access to the holy of holies, where God ‘dwelt,’ was only possible through the mediation of a priest and on the basis of substitutionary sacrifice.

Breaking the Law carried heavy penalties, including excommunication and even death. Israel was expected to be faithful to the Law to enjoy the blessings of God (Deuteronomy 28). This was not the blessings of salvation being earnt by the good works of the Law. The same parallel occurs for us. We are saved exclusively by grace on the basis of our faith in Christ’s substitutionary death for us. This frees us to live a life that accords with God’s character. In both the Old and New Testaments, the principle operates that God’s people can and should live out a holiness consistent with their calling (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 4:1; Hebrews 12:12-17). The intentional refusal to live this way is a demonstration that those who do so are not members of God’s family. In both Testaments the demand to be holy stems from God’s prior saving activity.

This study is essentially a summary of ‘The Kingdom Revealed in Israel’s History’ by Graeme Goldsworthy in ‘*Gospel and Kingdom’* (The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1987)