

MIGHTIER THAN I

After the Lord destroyed the world with a Great Flood, He made a covenant with Abraham in which He promised to save the world through him. The Lord commanded Abraham to leave his land, and to go to a land which He would show him, and the Lord said to Him, "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) The Lord promised to make Abraham a father of many nations, and He obliged him to believe Him and to obey Him. (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21) The Lord would through Abraham's faithfulness bless the world. He said:

Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. (Genesis 18:18, 19)

When Abraham was prepared to obey the Lord's command to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, the Lord said to him:

By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:16-18)

The Lord renewed the covenant with Abraham's son, Isaac. As the Lord told Abraham so he told Isaac to go to a land which He would show him, and the Lord said to him:

I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father; And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Genesis 26:3-5)

The Lord renewed the covenant with Isaac's son, Jacob, saying, "Thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 28:14)

When the descendants cried out to the Lord to deliver them from their bondage in Egypt, the Lord said he would deliver them for the sake of His covenant with the patriarchs. The Scriptures say, "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them." (Exodus 2:24, 25) The Lord made good on His promise, and He delivered His people from the Egyptians. He saved His people from bondage, and He drowned the Egyptian pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea.

After the Lord delivered the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, He made a covenant with them in which He promised to be their God, and obliged them to obey Him. He said to them:

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. (Exodus 19:4-6)

The people agreed to the Lord's terms, and said, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do." (Exodus 19:8)
The Lord revealed Himself to Moses as both severe and merciful. He said:

The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6, 7)

The Lord revealed to Moses that He is severe, and severely punishes sinners; at the same time, however, He is also merciful, and forgives the sinner who repents of his sins.

The Israelites did not so as the Lord commanded, however; they continually disobeyed Him. As they made their way to the promised land, they disobeyed Him, and did not repent, and so He punished them for their disobedience. On more than one occasion, when the people rebelled against the Lord, He destroyed them with fire. (Numbers 11:1; 16:35)

When the Israelites were finally ready to enter into the promised land, Moses reminded them of their past disobedience, and he exhorted them to obey the Lord. He said:

The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; And repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face. Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them. (Deuteronomy 7:7-11)

The people did not listen, however, and they continued in their disobedience.

After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided into Israel in the north, and Judah in the south, and the two were never again unified. Jerusalem remained the capital city in the south, and Omri, when he became king in the north, built his capital city, and named it 'Samaria,' after the man from whom he purchased the land, and the kingdom came to be known as Samaria. (1 Kings 16:23, 24)

In the days of the divided monarchy of Israel and Judah, the people rebelled against the Lord, and so the Lord sent Isaiah the prophet to prophesy against them. Isaiah sang a song, in which he compared Israel to a vineyard. The Lord tended the vineyard, placing around it a protective hedge. He removed the stones from the soil and planted the best vines. He built in it a winepress and a tower. He looked for fruit, but found only worthless wild grapes. So, the Lord said He would remove His hedge of protection, and allow His vineyard to be eaten up and trampled. There would be no one to tend it. It would grow briars and thorns, there would be no

rain for it. Isaiah explained, “For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.” (Isaiah 5:7) The prophet prophesied to them that the Lord would destroy them if they would not repent. He warned them that the Lord in His severity would send invading armies to conquer them, and to scatter them abroad. The prophet said, “Therefore he hath poured upon him the fury of his anger, and the strength of battle: and it hath set him on fire round about, yet he knew not; and it burned him, yet he laid it not to heart.” (Isaiah 42:25)

Through Isaiah the prophet, the Lord promised severity to His rebellious people. Through that same prophet, however, He also promised mercy. Isaiah said:

But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him. (Isaiah 43:1-7)

God created the people of Israel, and He created them for Himself. They were His precious possession, and He would not forsake them. If they had to pass through water, then He would preserve them. If they had to pass through fire, then He would protect them. He would sacrifice other nations in order to redeem them. After their dispersion he would from every direction gather them to Himself, because they were His creation. Of course, the Lord’s people are not limited to the physical descendants of Abraham; they are rather all who have the faith of Abraham. Isaiah prophesied, not only the Lord’s gathering of faithful Jews, but of faithful Gentiles also. According to the word of the prophet, the Assyrian army conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, and carried the people away into exile. The king of Assyria sent his own people to replace the exiled Israelites. Those Assyrians intermingled with the Israelites that remained, and mixed their pagan religion with the true one. (2 Kings 17:41) After the Assyrian exile, Ezekiel the prophet warned the people of the southern kingdom that they would meet the same doom as their northern counterparts. Yet, he also prophesied that the Lord would gather His people from among the nations, and wash away their sins, and put his Spirit within them so that they might obey Him from the heart. The people did not repent, and the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, and carried those people away into exile. When the Jews in Babylon finally returned to their homeland to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple, the people of Samaria opposed them with violence, and the enmity between them continued until the time of Christ. (John 4:9)

When the Son of God came into the world, God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Him by calling the people “preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:3) He proclaimed to the people that being a descendant of Abraham did not make them right with God; they needed to repent of their sins, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance. John, drawing on imagery used by prophets who preceded him, told the people that, if they did not bear the proper fruit of religion, then they would be like a tree which the Lord would cut down, and cast into the fire to be burned as refuse. The people had respect for John, and

thought He was a prophet; some considered that He might even be the long-expected Christ. John knew what they were thinking, and answered them, saying:

I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable. (Luke 3:16, 17)

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; the washing with water signified the washing away of sins. John was not the Christ, but a forerunner of Him who is far greater than himself, and who was ready to judge the nation. John baptized with water, but the Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Employing a metaphor from agriculture, John said that the Christ would, as it were, use a winnowing fork to separate wheat from chaff, the valuable kernel from the worthless chaff. He would gather the kernels into His granary, and burn up the chaff. The Christ would separate them that bear fruit from them that do not. The former He would gather to Himself, and the latter He would destroy with everlasting fire. This was a dire warning to the people to repent, or be destroyed; to bear fruit, or be punished. John would not judge them; was the messenger sent to warn them that Christ would judge them. Jesus will baptize a man either with the Holy Spirit, or with fire.

Saint Luke records that John preached many like things to the people. No doubt many took to heart the words He spoke to them. One man did not repent, however: King Herod. Herod had taken to himself his brother's wife, Herodias, and had thereby broken the law of God. John reproved the king for this, and for all the evils he had done. The king was hard of heart, however, and did not repent. Worse than this, Saint Luke writes, Herod eventually shut up that great prophet in prison in an attempt to silence him. When John was baptizing the people, Jesus, too, was baptized. Although Jesus had no sins to wash away, His baptism by John was, as it was to every Jew, a matter of obedience to God. When Jesus was baptized, He prayed, and the heavens opened up, and the Holy Spirit, in the bodily shape of a dove, descended upon Him, and His Father in heaven said to Him, "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22) In this, the Father and the Holy Spirit bore witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John would the next day say, "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost." (John 1:33) So it was that John recognized Jesus as the one that would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

A few years after Jesus ascended into heaven, when Saul was still persecuting the church, Philip preached the gospel in the city of Samaria and preached Christ to the people there, and the Samaritans believed in the Lord Jesus, and were baptized in His name. Saint Luke records the result:

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. (Acts 8:14-17)

When the Samaritans believed in Jesus, however, they did not receive the Holy Spirit. This the Jewish believers regarded as an anomaly, for Jesus had received the Holy Spirit when He was baptized, and they, having been baptized, had received the Holy Spirit just as soon as Jesus sent Him into the world. So, the apostles sent to the Samaritans Peter and John, the same John who had once asked Jesus for permission to call down fire upon the

Samaritans, and the two apostles prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, and they did receive Him. In this way, ancient hostility was put to rest, and two feuding nations became one in the unity of the Holy Spirit under the headship of Christ. That Jesus baptized the Samaritans with the Holy Spirit was proof that the Old Covenant was in its twilight, and a new day was dawning on the world, a day in which the Lord would fulfill His promise to Abraham when He said, "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." (Genesis 12:3)

Let us thank God for sending His Son into the world. Let us be glad that His Son has baptized us with the Holy Spirit. Let us praise God that through His Son He is saving the world.

And now to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons and one God, be ascribed by us, and by the whole Church, as is most due, the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.