

# WHAT IS THE “GOOD NEWS” OF THE THIRD ANGEL’S MESSAGE

By Paul Penno Jr.

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David Irving is the author of a book, “Hitler’s War,” in which he denies that there were gas ovens at Auschwitz and that Hitler did not authorize the extermination of Jews. His book has stirred a storm of comment regarding historians. In France and Germany it is against the law to publish such statements that are considered historical lies. The comment in the press regarding Irving’s book has stirred much discussion about the evil results of twisting and distorting historical facts. Irving “is a falsifier of history,” says Lawyer Richard Rampton.

The person who loves Bible truth is also concerned about the importance of historians telling the truth about history. He who lies about the past lies about the future; “we cannot escape history,” said Abraham Lincoln. A distorted or falsified history spells ruin for the future of a nation, which is why German leaders view with alarm all efforts to falsify the history of Germany’s past lest a future generation in ignorance or misinformation repeat that sad history.

The same honest concern applies to the history of God’s work. The NIV for Jeremiah 8:8 reveals the prophet as telling the Kingdom of Judah that their historians have falsified their national history and in so doing plunged their nation into ruin. “How can you say, ‘We are wise for we have the law [torah] of the Lord,’ when actually the lying pen of the scribes

has handled it falsely?” Likewise, the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day “handled falsely” their history and thereby prepared to lead the nation to crucify the Son of God. A wise writer has warned the church that “we have nothing to fear for the future except as we forget the way the Lord has led us and His teaching in our past history.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus says, “Take heed that no man deceive you” (Mt. 24:4). To be deceived is not merely a temporary setback, it can be fatal.

In this time of great crisis for God’s work of proclaiming the gospel to all the world, it is especially important that the history of the work of the Holy Spirit not be “falsified” as wrote the ancient scribes in Jeremiah’s day. Those who dig into the facts of national or church history and present them honestly are to be welcomed not resented or silenced. “Prove all things,” says the inspired apostle, and “hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). You want your doctor to be careful and accurate when it comes to your health; it’s also important to remember that the health of the church is involved with honest history.

What is the new covenant?

God’s promises to Abraham (and therefore to us as well) are “the new covenant.” The first step in understanding the new covenant is to see that when God makes a covenant, it is always a promise on His part. Paul tells us that God’s “covenant” with Abraham was His “promise” to him (Galatians 3:17).

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, p. 196.

Abraham the unbeliever became “the father of us all” when he chose to believe those promises of God. “It is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed [that is, all of us], not only to those who are of the law [natural descendants, literal Jews], but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ... the father of many nations” (Romans 4:6-18).

We read those promises in Genesis 12: “[1] I will make you a great nation; [2] I will bless you [3] and make your name great; [4] and you shall be a blessing. [5] I will bless those who bless you, [6] and I will curse him who curses you; and [7] in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (vss. 2, 3). The promises were renewed again in chapter 15 when God called him out of his tent one night and asked him to count the stars: “So shall your descendants be” (vs. 5).

As one reads the entire story through chapters 12-19, the surprising fact emerges that God never asked Abraham to make any promise in return! God’s “new covenant” was totally one-sided. Abraham did the only right thing he could do when he responded with faith: “He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (vs. 6). That is all that God has asked us to do: believe His promise to us. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Those who worry that salvation by grace through faith alone won’t produce enough

works need to remember that true faith always “works by love” (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Galatians 5:6).

The unique nature of God's covenant.

God’s covenant is always a one-sided promise on His part, because He knows that our nature is so weak and sinful that we cannot keep our promises to Him. When we make promises to Him and then inevitably break them later, we feel down on ourselves, “I-am-no-good,” “I-am-not-cut-out-to-go-to-heaven,” etc. Note how Paul speaks of God’s “covenant” and “promise” as being identical: “The law ... cannot annul the covenant ... that it should make the promise of no effect” (Galatians 3:17).

The old covenant “gives birth to bondage,” says Paul (Galatians 4:24). Some people in church even give up in despair, and many go through their so-called “Christian experience” under a constant cloud of discouragement.

But the confusion about the two covenants can be resolved very simply. The problem concerns “the law” that was given at Mt. Sinai; does that law alter the “new covenant” that was the straight-forward promise of God to Abraham and thus to us?

Paul was probably the first Israelite who clearly understood the function of the law and of the two covenants in the light of Israel’s up and down, discouraging Old Testament history.

In several simple steps in Galatians Paul clarifies the confusion:

a. “The blessing of Abraham” is to come on everyone, “that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14). Not one human soul is left out.

b. A “will” or covenant that anyone makes (even God’s!) cannot be annulled or added to once the testator dies (vs. 15). In God’s “will” or “covenant” He promised (and then swore to it with a solemn oath) to give Abraham the whole earth “for an everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8). This had to mean after the resurrection, for he could never inherit it that way unless he also was given everlasting life. But since only “righteousness” can “dwell” in the “new earth” (2 Peter 3:13), the promise had to include making righteous those who believe God’s promise. Therefore the new covenant has to be the essence of righteousness by faith.

c. When we make a covenant, it is always a contract. You do so-and-so, and then I will do-so-and-so. But God never makes such bargains with us humans. His new covenant is always an out-and-out promise on His part.

d. God explicitly said that His promise was made to Abraham’s descendant (singular, “Seed”) “who is Christ.” We are not left out, but we come into the picture only as being “in Christ” by adoption through faith (vs. 16).

e. Since God made His solemn promise to Abraham (which He sealed with an oath), nothing under heaven could change an iota so that the giving of the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai 430 years after Abraham’s time could not be an extra feature put into the “new covenant.” It could not invalidate in the least God’s one-sided sworn promise to him (vs. 17).

f. “If the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise”

(vs. 18). The new covenant doesn’t specialize in telling us what to do, but it tells us what to believe.

g. Then Paul asks the logical question everybody asks: why then did God speak the ten commandments from Mt. Sinai? It was a terror-inducing demonstration with lightning, an earthquake, fire, and a death boundary (vs. 19). God didn’t need to frighten Abraham out of his wits like that! All He had to do for Abraham was to write the ten commandments upon his heart as being so much Good News; then Abraham found his greatest joy in obedience. Why not do the same for Israel when they were gathered at Mt. Sinai on their way to the Promised Land? That would have solved all the problems that Israel had to meet ever afterwards.

h. Paul explains the reason why the law had to be written in stone: “the law ... was added because of transgressions, till the Seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made” (vs. 19; the word “added” in the original has the meaning of emphasized, underlined, but not the idea of changing God’s “will” made out to Abraham). But what were the “transgressions” that made this new “emphasizing” or “underlining” necessary?

The forming of the old covenant is the answer. Before we get to the fire and earthquake of Mt. Sinai and the writing of the law on stone in Exodus 20, we find that Israel had already made the mistake in chapter 19 of forming an “old covenant.” They wanted to substitute it for God’s new or everlasting covenant. The story is fascinating, for we can see ourselves in it.

When the people gathered at Mt. Sinai, God told Moses to renew to them the same “new covenant” promises He had made to their father Abraham: “Tell the children of Israel: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people”” (vs. 5).

When He said “My covenant” He was referring to the same covenant He had made with Abraham—His one-sided promise. “Keep My covenant,” He said; that is, cherish it. The Hebrew verb *shamar* is the same word used in Genesis 2:15 where we read that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden “to tend and keep it.” It couldn’t make sense to say that Adam was to “obey” the Garden! There’s a play on words in what God said to Israel: If you will “treasure” My promise to Abraham, I will “treasure you above all peoples.” For us to believe as did Abraham makes God very happy!

And the Hebrew verb *shamea* translated as “obey My voice” is rendered in the Old Testament as “hear” 760 times, as “hearken” 196 times, but as “obey” only 81 times. The root meaning of “obey” in either Hebrew or Greek is to listen attentively (in Greek it is to bend the ear down low so you catch every syllable). Any parent knows that if you can get your child to listen to you, you’ve probably gone a long ways toward obedience.

Thus the Lord said to Israel, “If you will listen to My voice and cherish or treasure the promise I made to your father Abraham, you will be ‘a special treasure

to Me above all people.” You will be the head and not the tail; there will be no need for great world empires such as Assyria, Babylon, Grecia, Persia, or Rome, to tread down the earth and oppress you. You will be above all nations. Israel will embody the truths of righteousness by faith. “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (vs. 6). Israel’s temple would outdo and outlast Greece’s Parthenon!

But Israel did not understand. They did not have the faith of Abraham. Mired in legalistic thinking, they made a vain promise, something that God never asked Abraham to do. “All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). Thus they formed the old covenant.

What could God do? If they will not keep step with Him, He must humble Himself to keep step with them. A long detour now becomes inevitable.

It was Paul finally who saw the deep significance of this old covenant promise of the people: “Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin [as in a prison of our own choosing], that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:21-24).

The word “tutor” is pedagogue in the Greek, from *paideuo* which means to exercise stern, harsh

discipline. Paul saw the old covenant that the people voluntarily put themselves under as functioning like a stern disciplinarian, a policeman if you please, keeping the people of Israel under custody until such time as they could find their freedom again in the kind of justification by faith which their father Abraham enjoyed.

Since they brought the old covenant upon themselves, God must let them learn through their own history how vain were their promises to keep His law. The law written in tables of stone imposed upon them a burden of “ought,” a never-ending obligation they could not fulfill, never giving liberty, but always threatening punishment if not kept perfectly. It must serve in this long national detour now as a kind of jailer, driving them “under the law” until at last they come to the experience of their father Abraham to be justified by faith and not by their “works of law.”

Thus the difference between the new covenant and the old covenant is simply “who makes the promise.” In the new covenant, it’s God; in the old covenant, it’s the people. And the keeping of the promise depends entirely on who makes it.

In the new covenant, the foundation is solid Rock; in the old, it’s sand. Our salvation (and Israel’s) does not depend on our making promises to God (or keeping them) but on our believing His promises to us.

Believing God’s new covenant promise delivers us from the “yoke of bondage” Paul speaks of. No longer do we serve Him through fear of punishment, or even from hoping for some great reward. The

new covenant delivers from the constant sense of futility, that nagging sense of “ought,” “I-must-be-more-faithful, I-must-do-better, I-must-be-more-unselfish, I-must-study-more, I-must-read-my-Bible-more, I-must-give-more, etc., etc.,” all without end. All this sense of compulsion is summed up in Paul’s expression of being “under the elements of the world,” the health-destroying angst or anxiety that all humans know by nature (Galatians 4:3).

The “tutor” or “jailer” of the old covenant drove Israel through the centuries on a relentless history of ups and downs from Sinai all the way to their crucifixion of their Messiah. Prophets, judges, and some kings tried earnestly but in vain to bring in permanent reformation and revival. Samuel’s blessed ministry ended in the people’s clamor for a king like the nations around them; Saul nearly ruined the nation.

#### There Were Ups and Downs in Israel’s History

David seems to have understood that the Lord’s new covenant promise included total national preeminence in the world: “I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; nor shall the sons of wickedness oppress them anymore, as previously. . . I will subdue all your enemies” (1 Chron. 17:9, 10).

Solomon for a time grasped the promise, praying “that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other” (1 Kings 8:60). Translated into simple English, this meant that there were to be no cruel world empires to trample down the earth, such as Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia,

Grecia or Rome. Israel would have remained forever the benevolent super-power of the world. But Assyria rose to terrorizing world dictatorship in 933 B.C., almost the exact time Kings Rehoboam and Jeroboam began their slide into apostasy in 931. From then on there was seldom anything in Israel but old covenant disappointment, century after century. Two fantastic phenomena evolved side by side: apostasy deepening in both Israel and Judah, paralleled by Assyria's growing terrorism. As God's people's apostasy became almost total, Babylon's and at last Rome's rule became ever more oppressive.

Who can imagine how much needless suffering the world at large had to endure! It all came as the direct result of the old covenant which Israel fastened upon themselves at Sinai. This fatal choice was the beginning of the detour which must after many centuries finally lead God's people back to the justification by faith that Abraham experienced. There is no evidence that any king after David truly understood it. Probably Paul was the first to discern this significance of Israelite history as a detour leading back eventually to the new covenant given to Abraham: "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24).

Even the way the law was given at Sinai in Exodus 20 was the result of their old covenant. Did the Lord have to frighten Abraham in that terror-induced way? He simply wrote the law in his heart. In contrast, at Sinai He must write it on tables of stone! And even the sanctuary was an

accommodation to the people's unbelief because Paul says the *old* covenant required an "earthly sanctuary" (Heb. 9:1). Build it, the Lord said, "that I may dwell *among them*," since because of their old covenant unbelief He could not dwell in them as He wanted to do (Ex. 25:8). The Levitical sacrificial service with its rivers of blood, which the Lord never "delighted in," was the result of the people's unbelief (cf. Isa. 1:11-14).<sup>2</sup>

A bird's-eye view of Israel's story demonstrates old covenant unbelief impelling them to final ruin. Monarch after monarch dragged their nation downhill. Not one ruler of the northern kingdom ever did what was "right," although the Lord pleaded with them by numerous prophets and messengers (2 Kings 17:13, 14). Finally in 722 B.C. Assyria crushed them forever as a nation and scattered them irrevocably among the Gentiles. Even "the tail" disappeared.

Meanwhile, Judah steadily rebelled. Several of their kings did desperately try a stop-gap of revival and reformation, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and last of all, beloved young Josiah. But Scripture shows that each simply tried to renew an old covenant revival. Never was new covenant justification by faith recovered. They were sincerely blind to the faith which Abraham had experienced. The problem was not that they had an "organization;" it was their heart-alienation.

Hezekiah (729-686 B.C.) narrowly missed going down in history as the greatest king ever to sit on

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<sup>2</sup> See also Jer. 6:20, 7:22; Amos 5:21-27, etc.

David's throne. If he had said "amen" when the Lord told him, "Set your house in order, for you shall die" (2 Kings 20:1), his outstanding performance would have left no record of evil in his reign. But even he was not reconciled to God!

When he pouted and begged to be healed, telling the Lord it's not fair ("Haven't I served with 'a perfect heart?'"") the Lord added 15 years to his life; then came tragedy. The healed king proudly exposed the nation's secrets to their future enemy Babylon, and sired the worst ruler Judah ever had—Manasseh. The kingdom bottomed out when he taught the people "to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel" (2 Chron. 33:9). Good king Hezekiah's reformation evaporated in thin air when his wicked son ascended the throne. The people followed him into evil as eagerly as they had followed Hezekiah into old covenant reformation. Faithful Hezekiah's son is cited as the prime reason for their national ruin (Jer. 15:4).

#### Josiah Was the Last Reprieve.

This young king's zeal for the Lord was unbounded (639-608 B.C.). Again, in deep piety he sought to renew the old covenant: "He made all who were present in Jerusalem and Benjamin take their stand for it" (2 Chron. 34:31, 32). But the prophetess Huldah had to tell him sadly that it was too late; all this "reformation" was only veneer-deep. Utter disaster must "gender [its] bondage" to the ruin of the nation and their captivity in an alien land (cf. Gal. 4:24).

Josiah even surpassed Hezekiah in his devotion to the Spirit of Prophecy, zealous in following every detail as he knew it—especially Deuteronomy. Never had a king so meticulously obeyed the written word. The young Jeremiah rejoiced. But while maintaining such devotion to the written Spirit of Prophecy, Josiah managed to reject its living demonstration. The problem was that the renewed "spiritual gift" came through the most unlikely avenue that king or people could imagine—the mouth of a supposedly pagan king!

Pharaoh Necho of Egypt was leading his army in opposition to the rising power of Babylon. Josiah thought it his duty to attack him. Didn't Moses in the Spirit of Prophecy tell Israel to oppose the heathen? But the zealous king couldn't discern how Necho was on God's errand. He warned Josiah, "Refrain from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you" (2 Chron. 35:21). The Chronicler says the king "did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God." The Lord was forced to let the young king die of his battle wounds (vss. 22-24). Jeremiah was heart-broken, for Josiah's revival fizzled out with his untimely death. From then on it was downhill all the way.

#### Reliving Josiah's blindness.

Like Josiah, is it possible for us as Seventh-day Adventists to think we are super-loyal to "the Spirit of Prophecy" while at the same time rejecting its living demonstration? That actually happened in 1888; our brethren were replaying Josiah's "tape." In rejecting that "most precious message" "sent from heaven" they imagined they were loyal to Ellen

White's *past writings* while setting aside the Lord's living message.<sup>3</sup>

Are we replaying Israel's old covenant revivals and reformations? Sober reflection forces an answer: as a body we are as lukewarm now as we were a century ago. When "we" "in a great degree" and "in a great measure" rejected that "most precious" new covenant truth that came in the 1888 era, "we" locked ourselves into "many more years" of an old covenant detour as surely as did Israel at Sinai.<sup>4</sup>

The faith-experience of the new covenant was the main focus of leadership-opposition to the 1888 message. While they opposed Jones and Waggoner, they actually preferred the essential motifs of the old covenant. Ellen White was shown in vision that these revered leaders were wasting their time trying to urge a view different from Waggoner's, for she was "shown" that he was right.<sup>5</sup> Especially in 1890 and on until 1907 the opposition to the 1888 Good News view of the two covenants won the day.<sup>6</sup>

Motif analysis can demonstrate that old covenant ideas have continued to predominate in our

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Uriah Smith's and G. I. Butler's letters to Ellen White of Feb. 17, 1890, Sept. 24, 1892 (*Manuscript Memories of 1888*, pp. 152—157, 206—212). The Lord not only sent "prophets" to Israel, but "messengers" also (2 Chron. 36:16).

<sup>4</sup> See Letter 184, 1901; *Evangelism*, p. 696.

<sup>5</sup> See Ellen White Letters 30, 59, 1890; also George Knight, *Angry Saints*, pp. 75, 76, 92, 93.

<sup>6</sup> See Sabbath School Lessons, Third Quarter, 1907; letter of A. T. Jones to their author, R. S. Owen, Feb. 20, 1908.

experience, especially in our children's lessons and literature. Even our Commentary leans to the view of those who rejected the 1888 message.<sup>7</sup> Our revivals and reformations have followed the pattern of those of Israel, including the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Not yet have we as a church body truly recovered the new covenant which "we" largely rejected a century ago. The famine predominates alike in both orthodox and "independent" ministries.

Who can estimate the confusion and tragic apostasies that have come because of the unsatisfied hunger within the church (and the world) for that "most precious" gospel? Speaking of Uzzah irreverently grabbing the sacred ark, Ellen White in 1890 pleaded with her brethren, "Take your hand off the ark of God, and *let the Spirit of God come in and work in mighty power*" (1888 *Materials*, p. 543).

That little word "let" means that the Holy Spirit is eager to go to "work." When that new covenant message is rescued from the oblivion of the archives, He can feed it like heavenly manna to our famishing world.

A converted Jew likened his people's problem to a farmer driving a horse and wagon to town. A wheel falls off; does he look for it further ahead down the road, or does he go back to where it fell off?

If the Jews must recover what they lost 2000 years ago, is it too humiliating for us to go back and recover what we lost a century ago?

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<sup>7</sup> See article "Covenant," SDA Bible Dictionary, p. 229; this statement aptly defines the Commentary position as basically the same as those who rejected.



Going back to retrieve what he lost would be the farmer's only hope, wouldn't it?

What do the two covenants mean to us today?

The two covenants are not hemmed in by matters of time, as though people living anciently were automatically under the old and we today are automatically under the new. There were people in Old Testament times who lived under the new covenant (Abraham, for example); and we today can be living under the old covenant if we don't clearly understand and believe the freedom-giving gospel.

A gourmet chef can prepare a delicious seven-course dinner with good wholesome food, but if he puts in even a tiny amount of arsenic, it is spoiled. Even if it doesn't kill us, it will cause paralysis. Even a tiny amount of old covenant ideas mixed in with otherwise gospel concepts can paralyze a healthy spiritual experience and produce the lukewarmness that so characterizes the church in these last days. Lukewarmness in His people is a mixture of hot and cold that produces the nausea that Jesus says makes Him so sick at His stomach that He feels like throwing up (Revelation 3:17, 18). The healing can come only through a full recovery of the new covenant "truth of the gospel."

It's astonishing how old covenant ideas can penetrate into our thinking. Even our hymns are sometimes examples, like the beautiful one, "O Jesus, I Have Promised To Serve Thee To the End." But we can turn it into a new covenant hymn by simply changing one word so it reads, "O Jesus, I Have Chosen ...". Well-meaning teachers can

fasten innocent children into old covenant spiritual bondage by inducing them to make promises to God, which He has never asked them to do. They promise; and then later perhaps in forgetfulness they break their promise, and then the syndrome of "bondage" develops into spiritual discouragement. Parents sometimes weep their eyes out wondering why we lose so many youth who get discouraged spiritually and leave our churches. All kinds of tragedies can develop in an atmosphere permeated with old covenant "Christian experience."

But repentance is possible.

Both Abraham and Sarah waded through the discouragement of old covenant thinking. His marriage to Hagar was one such tragic step. Sarah cherished bitterness against God in her heart because she could not get pregnant. "The Lord has restrained me from bearing children," she complained (Genesis 16:2). Her solution: the old covenant idea of adopting Ishmael as her son, so as to help God fulfill His promise. Finally, we read in Hebrews 11:11 that Sarah had an experience of new covenant repentance. Her heart was melted somehow, by the grace of God. "By faith Sarah conceived . . ." And finally, Abraham's faith triumphed when he offered up Isaac as an object lesson, sensing a little of what it cost the heavenly Father to offer up His only Son (Genesis 22).

Correctly understood, the message of the new covenant is part of the light which is yet to "lighten the earth with glory" in the closing hours of this world's history (Revelation 18:1-4). The message will be centered in a true understanding of

righteousness by faith which alone can prepare God's people for the final time of trouble (see 19:1-14). Many, when they hear its Good News will awaken as from a dream. All of God's biddings will become enablings, and the Ten Commandments will become to them ten precious statements of Good News. Nothing will be able to stop them from responding to God's gracious last call, "Come out of her [Babylon], My people" (Revelation 18:4).