

GOD'S PROMISE TO FAMILIES¹

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Millions of computers were ravaged by the “I-Love-You” virus, with losses in the billions of dollars. It would be money well spent if we humans could learn from the disaster a simple lesson: “Don’t believe everybody who tells you ‘I-love-you.’”

For example, a young woman (or teen) knows the deep inner, God-given, yearning to be loved and appreciated; she has come from a dysfunctional family (whose family isn’t that in some way?); a predator tells her “I love you!” and she clicks on it, and the next thing is she’s pushing a pram on the sidewalk and buying cheap layettes at K-Mart, while the one who sired the inhabitant of the pram is telling some other victim “I love you.”

And it’s vice-versa, too: a long section in God’s inspired book of Proverbs warns boys and men against believing the “I-love-you” of a seductress, “the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman,” “neither let her take thee with her eyelids” (6:23-35).

How can we humans learn not to fall for the subtle deception of false love? A writer tells how the original split of his parents ended up with 12 marriages in his family, 7 of which ended again in divorce. “Few people I have met have not been touched [translation: wounded] by divorce.” Somebody fell again and again for false “love.”

Is there something helpful in the Bible? Shockingly, we never read God saying those exact

words, “I love you,” although we speak of the Bible as a love-letter. What we *do* read is that He says, “I *have* loved you with an everlasting love,” past tense with continuing results (Jer. 31:3). The best defense possible against some charlatan’s deceptive “I-love-you”! God’s emphasis is always historical: “I have loved you” ever since you were born, He says; open your eyes and see this historical evidence in your own personal life. Even the pains and sorrows you have known have been My “whom the Lord loves He chastens,” He says (Heb. 12:6). “As many as I love I rebuke” (Rev. 3:19).

The historical reality of “I *have* loved you with an everlasting love” is seen where God revealed it in sharp detail at the cross. Every human has been bitten by Israel’s “fiery [love-bug] serpents” in our “wilderness,” and healing is found (and is only found) in looking at the serpent “lifted up” upon the tree (Jn. 3:14-16). The satanic “love-bug” virus is powerless against the person whose mind and soul is etched with a sharply defined vision of what happened on the cross where Christ took our sins upon Himself. Look and live.

Can an Unloving Person Learn to Love?

Is it difficult for an unloving person to learn how to love? Let’s be honest: The answer is yes if you don’t have a Teacher; in fact, impossible.

Suppose you have come from a dysfunctional family (the Bible says that “all families of the earth” are dysfunctional apart from Christ—see Gen. 12:3); you were not loved as a baby or a child. You had a bad start. You can’t be happy unless you learn to love; now can you learn?

¹ Psalm 133:1, 202, 516.

Will power and psychological savvy won't help other than put on a veneer and deceive even yourself. Human nature is such that you must believe that you are loved before you can be capable of loving others. The reason? Love is something no one is born with; you have no self-starter. You have to *receive* before you can *give*.

And here is where the Bible steps in: it says that you have been loved since babyhood and you are loved now. Who is your Lover? Your heavenly Father.

You can find that "love" in the Bible as a literary formula; but how can you feel it, or know it, for yourself? The answer is not something to *do* as a "work," but something to *see* by a choice. As an example, "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. . . . I [Jesus] say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Therefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, . . . shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" (Mt. 6:29, 30). *Let the spring flowers teach your heart—"consider" them.*

When your unloving heart can "consider" how your heavenly Father feels toward you, that He has "adopted" you, an orphan, into His "family," that He loves you as much as He loved His only Son whom He "gave" for *you*, get on your knees alone somewhere and tell Him "Thank You." And tell Him again. The Light will begin to shine into your darkened heart. And you can say with John: "We have [# 1] known and [# 2] believed the love that God hath to us" (1 Jn. 4:16). Don't forget # 2.

God's Promise to Abraham's Family

The Lord called Abraham to make of his descendants a people who would be a blessing to every family on earth. That promise to Abraham has been fulfilled in the Christian church.

Yes, that's what makes it "most precious," to borrow Ellen White's phrase describing it. Peace with your spouse (or family or friends) is not possible unless first of all you have experienced "peace with God." And peace with God is the first consequence of being "justified by faith" (Rom. 5:1). When you are carrying a load of unresolved guilt, or when you are burdened with unrelieved fear, you cannot be happy inwardly. And if you are not happy inwardly, you will be outwardly miserable with family and friends.

The "most precious message" is not for perfect people. They don't need any more Good News than they already have. It's for imperfect people, yes, for sinners. The Pharisees complained of Jesus, "This man receiveth sinners" (Lk. 15:2). Our appeal is mainly to people who come from dysfunctional families.

Abraham came from a dysfunctional family—they were actually idolaters, worshipped idols (Josh. 24:2). The family that Abraham and Sarah established was dysfunctional—Abraham had two wives, and if you want trouble, that's the way to have it. So Isaac grew up in a dysfunctional family, problems between Ishmael and himself. Then there was also trouble between Isaac and Rebekeh, disagreement as to how to relate to Jacob and Esau, and Jacob grew up in a very dysfunctional family. And what about his twelve sons? Almost

endless family problems. And these are what we call “the patriarchs.”

But there is Good News. When the long story began, the Lord promised Abraham when He called him to leave his idolatrous family, “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Jesus specializes in blessing dysfunctional families. No matter how deep are the psychological scars you carry, in Him you will be blessed.

The record says that when God promised Abraham rich blessings, “he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). If you have come from a dysfunctional family, do not despair. That’s where many of God’s true people have come from—even David, the man after God’s own heart (yes, Jesse’s family was dysfunctional). And something further: so was the family of “the son of David.” John 7:5 tells how Jesus suffered the unbelief of His family. We are invited to “overcome” through faith in the One who has promised to bless our family (Rev. 3:20).

Don’t sit back and revel in your security, telling yourself that the painful Jews/Arabs conflicts in Palestine are none of your business. The conflict began in the heart of “our father Abraham,” and rages in every human heart since.

It’s Abraham’s story—Ishmael versus Isaac. Abraham is the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:11), yet for a time he did not believe. And so with us—all our problems in our own hearts and lives stem from our staggering in unbelief as did Abraham and Sarah for decades.

In Genesis 12, 15, 17, God made a series of fantastic promises to Abraham, one being that he would have a son in whom “all families of the earth” would be “blessed.” Included also was the promise of land—initially all the land of Palestine, but in fact “that he should be the heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13). But then everything seemed to be against any fulfillment of these great promises of God: (1) Sarah couldn’t get pregnant, and as the decades rolled by she got beyond child-bearing age; it seemed impossible. (2) Abraham did not “inherit” a foot of land, but lived in tents, able to buy only enough land for a burial place.

One of the most encouraging stories of all time is the one about the Bitter Lady who held in her heart the success or failure of the great plan of salvation. Her decision to go one way or the other was pivotal for the world. No, it was not the Virgin Mary, for she was never bitter. It was Sarah, the wife of Abraham; she indeed was bitter at one time, as only a woman could be in her circumstance.

She and Abraham were one flesh, as is true of all genuine marriages. It would have been impossible for God’s promises to Abraham to be fulfilled if his wife had chosen to block the way through unbelief (those promises in Gen. 12:1-3 included the coming of the Messiah through whom “all families of the earth [should] be blessed”). Both Abraham and Sarah were old and childless, and everybody thought the problem was Sarah—she was incapable of becoming pregnant—a shameful thing for a woman in those days. As the years and decades ground by slowly with no pregnancy in

sight, Sarah felt the blame keenly. Undoubtedly she had prayed and prayed, yet nothing happened. When you believe that God is Almighty and you pray and pray about a problem and nothing happens, what do you do? Sarah blamed God. She vented her bitterness on her husband: “See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children” (Gen. 16:2). She realizes that she is standing in the way of God’s fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, and it’s not her fault! God is to blame! No wonder they “staggered” in doubt and unbelief; unless they got busy and helped Him, God just couldn’t do for them what they hoped He would! So, they decided on a plan: a second marriage to a younger woman, Hagar, and Sarah would legally adopt the offspring—Ishmael, the child of “works.” So came into being the Arabs. The entire affair of Hagar, the slave-girl turned second wife, is programmed by Sarah’s bitterness.

Meanwhile, there is no way that “all families of the earth [can] be blessed” except that Abraham must have a “child of promise.” When Hagar bore Ishmael, Sarah’s bitterness only got worse. Hagar lorded it over her in subtle ways (women are capable of treating women that way!) until Sarah couldn’t stand it any longer. She blew up in her husband’s face: “My wrong be upon you! . . . The Lord judge between you and me” (vs. 5). If there were any doors in their tent, she probably slammed them as she walked out.

But then the story changes and becomes beautiful. Sarah did some thinking. Hebrews 11:11 says that she reconsidered and “she judged that He who had

promised would keep faith,” and so “by faith even Sarah herself received strength to conceive, though she was past age” (NEB). The blessed result: “Therefore from one man, and one as good as dead [Sarah?], there sprang descendants numerous as the stars or as the countless grains of sand on the sea-shore” (vs. 12). Among them: One who “saved the world.” It’s time for you and me to “judge that He who has promised will keep faith.”

God has made promises to you which seem as impossible of fulfillment as Sarah having a baby at the age of 90. You are tempted to doubt His love, His faithfulness. The momentum of 6000 years of sinful inheritance pushes you into a kind of “Christian” *karma*—“success depends on performance.” It’s the old covenant all over again. But now it’s time to overcome unbelief, and to believe God’s new covenant. And we can!

New Covenant living is the kind of life that Abraham lived. We don’t read that he ever made any promises to God, but he chose to believe God’s promises to him.

They were these:

1. “I will make of you a great nation.” In other words, you will have fulfillment,—super. You will be *somebody* (all this is Genesis 12:2, 3).

2. “I will bless you,” which means simply, make you happy,

3. “And make your name great.” You’ll become all you really want to become, in Him.

4. “You shall *be* a blessing” everywhere you go. In other words, you’ll always be making other people happy. It’s life to the full!

5. “I will bless those who bless you.” God will reward people who help you.

6. “I will curse him who curses you.” This has to be, as part of the blessing on you. You are under the Lord’s special protection.

7. “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That’s Christ, of course; but you are “in Christ” now, so you share in that joy.

Responding to these promises is beyond the level of mere emotion; all true obedience is based on the principle of simply believing these promises, that they are made to you. You ask the Lord to hold you by the hand as you follow Him step by step; He does!

This covenant (or promise) was made more distinct and far reaching in the Lord’s conversations with Abraham. He virtually promised the old man the sky! In him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The promise included land “northward, southward, eastward, and westward.” “Count the stars if you are able to number them,” God said. “So shall your descendants be.”

Staggering! The promises include:

- (1) Abraham’s descendants will become the greatest nation in the world;
- (2) The Messiah will come through them;
- (3) In them every family in the world will be “blessed;”
- (4) The land of Canaan will be their possession;
- (5) Even more, the promise includes the whole world, which must be the new earth;²

² Cf. Romans 4:13.

(6) Since the earth is to be an “everlasting possession,” the “new covenant” must include everlasting life as well in the earth made new;³

(7) Moreover, since only righteousness can dwell in this new earth,⁴ the new covenant promise includes making righteous all who believe;

(8) The down-payment on all this incredible blessing would be a miraculous birth;⁵ an “impossible” conception will take place enabling Abraham’s aged and sterile wife Sarah to bear a son whose name would be Isaac (“laughter”);

(9) The world’s Savior is not to come through Ishmael, who is a symbol of a do-it-yourself works program, but

(10) Christ will come through Isaac “the child of promise.’ This will forever demonstrate that Abraham’s true descendants are those only who have his faith.

What Promises Did God Ask Abraham To Make In Return?

If you read carefully, you will see that the answer is—none! The new covenant promise is entirely one-sided. God does all the promising. He does not ask us to make promises to Him, for He knows we cannot keep them.

But was Abraham expected to do nothing? What was his part in the bargain? The answer is an astounding one, that many have trouble with: only

³ John 3:16.

⁴ 2 Peter 3:13.

⁵ Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-6, 18; 17:1-8, 21; 18:14; Rom. 4:11.

one thing, *believe*. “He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”⁶

Difficult as it may be to confess, we must recognize that all the Lord asked from Abraham was *faith*. This does not mean that He did not *expect* obedience or that good works were not important. The Lord was teaching Abraham the principle of righteousness by faith. Once Abraham learned to believe, true obedience would follow as surely as fruit follows the blossom. And it did, for the Lord said later, “I have known him . . . to do righteousness and justice.”⁷

“Family Living” is living out the truths of genuine righteousness by faith. It is not what we must do in order to have happy homes. The Bible emphasis is on things that we must believe in order to have happy homes, because it is what we believe that transforms us in character from being the ornery, self-centered people that we are by nature into people in whom self has been crucified with Christ and He is permitted to live out His life within us (Gal. 2:20). Self-centered people are bound to have friction at home; the real, ultimate, powerful change in family relationships comes through the pure truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is what Ellen White described as “the third angel’s message in verity.” Through this means actual, dynamic love is created within cold hearts.

Only when we catch a glimpse of that *agape* of Christ in condescending to step down from the royalty of heaven and to become one of us and die

our second death at Calvary—only when that indescribable love penetrates our very soul, our mind, and heart will unity in the family begin to prevail whether it be in the home, the church, or committees.

When the love of Christ begins to constrain us, we will acknowledge, even in situations where we believe we were not necessarily at fault, that “I was wrong, I take responsibility for difficulties that have arisen here.” The goodness of God will lead us to both personal and systemic repentance. The love of Christ will cause us to esteem the other person better than our self. The love of Christ will compel us not to criticize the other party and justify our self. The love of Christ dwelling within the heart will constrain us not to bring a reviling accusation upon our brother.

When this evidence begins to appear in our lives we will know the meaning of justification by faith because we will have peace with God having been justified by faith. Then the following saying will be brought to pass:

“What is justification by faith?—It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which it is not in his power to do for himself. When men see their own nothingness, they are prepared to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ. When they begin to praise and exalt God all the day long, then by beholding they are becoming changed into the same image. What is regeneration?—It is revealing to man what

⁶ Gen. 15:6.

⁷ Gen. 18:19.

is his own real nature, that in himself he is worthless.”⁸

Here is the key to family unity. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Ps. 133:1). There is no earthly joy as sweet as for father, mother, and the children to be close a knit family where each trusts the other, love best the other, and enjoys being together. They are one. If your family is like that you just simply shout to glory hallelujah and praise God. It is not often that families are so united.

It is frankly acknowledged that the only effective way a family can have unity in this blessed sense is to be bathed in the love of God.

⁸ *Special Testimonies*, Series A, No. 9, p. 62; Nov. 22, 1896.