

# OLD TESTAMENT LIFE AND DEATH

## A SERMON

Preached on Lord's Day Morning August 7th, 1859

By Mister JAMES WELLS

AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD

Volume 1 Number 35

“Therefore, choose life, that both you and your seed may live.”

Deuteronomy 30:19

THESE words were addressed to the literal descendants of Abraham, the Israelites, *the several parts of whose position were a type of things which are eternal*; and this shall be the first thing from the words of our text I will notice this morning; and the second shall be *the kind of life which they are here exhorted to choose*, and the third shall be *the position in which the Christian stands in relation to the words of our text*.

First: Let us then glance for a few moments at some of the parts of the position of the Israelites, as a type of those things which are eternal. The apostle says, “Unto them pertained the adoption.” But how very different was their adoption from among other nations to be a nation or people consecrated ceremonially to God; how different that adoption unto and into a temporal, earthly relation to God; how very different that adoption from that adoption that is in Christ Jesus; the adoption that is in Christ Jesus is eternal; “Chosen in him and given to Christ.” Thus, everything lies with Jesus Christ; and that adoption will stand eternally good, because it is in Christ. We see here then, that while the one was a type of the other, there is an infinite difference between the two. “And unto them,” said the apostle, “pertained also the glory.” But then the glory which they had; namely, the Lord with them and round about them, to exalt and distinguish them as a nation, and bless them with all those temporal blessings, the several parts of that covenant set forth; how infinitely inferior this glory to that glory which is by Christ Jesus; the glory of eternal life by Jesus Christ, the glory of eternal righteousness, and the glory of eternal joy, and the glory of eternal peace, which is by the Lord Jesus Christ; how very different the two; And then, “To them,” said the apostle, “pertains the covenants;” he uses the plural; there were four covenants, yet all these four covenants are in the New Testament summed up in one. First, there was the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham in which he gave him the Land of Canaan. And this is a type, for all four of these covenants are a type of the one new covenant that is in Christ Jesus. The Lord's covenant with Abraham in giving him the land of Canaan is a shadow and type of the covenant of our God with Christ Jesus on behalf of his people; in which covenant he has given them an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fades not away. See here again, the wonderful

difference between the two. There were laws to regulate the obtaining, and the possessing, and the enjoying the advantages of the earthly Canaan; but then they were different, very different from those laws established for the obtaining of the eternal Canaan, the eternal inheritance, and for securing the advantages thereof. The second covenant was a covenant of service, as given at Mount Sinai; and this again is a type of that new covenant service established by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ; for as they were to serve God by sacrifice, so we have a Great High Priest who is a type forever; and who by one offering, by one sacrifice, has forever put away sin. And this service of God that is established by that one sacrifice is never to be broken up. The old covenant service was broken up, but this new and living way by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is never to be broken up. And the third covenant which the Lord made with them is recorded in the 28th of Deuteronomy, that was a covenant of conditional, but at the same time temporal, blessings; that they were to be blessed in the city and in the field, in their basket and in their store, in their going out and coming in; and blessed with all freedom that would make them happy as a people. This covenant, nevertheless, was conditional; but still it was a type of that covenant that is in Christ Jesus; only Christ has taken away the conditions pertaining to it; so that we are to be blessed in the field of this world, we are to be blessed in the city of God, we are to be blessed in that store that is in Christ; we are to be blessed in what the Lord is pleased to manifest to us, indicated by being blessed in the basket; we are to be blessed with eternal freedom. And thus, we see that the one is a type of the other, but still all that is gone; they have lost the blessings, but not one blessing wherewith the blessed God has blessed us in Christ Jesus is lost or ever can be lost. The fourth covenant the Lord made with that people was a covenant of royalty; that David's offspring should continue if they fulfilled the conditions of that covenant, they should continue successively to reign until Christ should come, and hence, down to the end of time, for they were never to lose their royalty, their throne, their crown, their scepter, nor their kingdom, only on the ground of apostacy from God's truth. David's literal offspring did apostatize, and therefore, lost the throne, the crown, the kingdom, and the royalty, of all that they had. But the Lord Jesus Christ did no sin, and therefore, his crown can never be lost, his kingdom can never be lost, his throne can never be lost, his glory can never be tarnished. These four covenants were a type of that one covenant that is in Christ Jesus; they were conditional and temporal, but this one covenant in Christ Jesus, answering to them all, is spiritual, is vital, is eternal, and is certain. Thus, the apostle might well call that dispensation a shadow of good things to come; for it was but a shadow. The earthly Canaan was but a shadow of the spiritual Canaan; and the earthly service, the ceremonial service, was but a shadow of that vital, spiritual, heart work wherein God appears as a Spirit, and his people are made spiritual, so as to worship him in the life of the Gospel, in spirit and in truth; the blessings of the third covenant, to which I have just referred, were but temporal and could be lost; but the blessings of this new covenant in Christ Jesus are the sure mercies of David, and are everlasting; that royalty has passed away, but Jesus still remains a King; of the increase of his government there shall be no end. Thus then, to them pertained the temporal, as a type of the eternal adoption, to them pertained the temporal covenants, as a type of the one everlasting covenant; and to them pertained the ministry of the law, as a type of that law of truth which the Lord ministers to his new covenant people; where he said, "I will put my laws into their minds, I will write them in their hearts; and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." The law that God gave them speaks in this way, "That they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not; finding fault with them." That is a beautiful expression when looked at in the reverse; "Finding fault with them;" as though the apostle would say, there is a covenant, and a people, included in that covenant; and it shall never be said he finds fault with them; they have faults with them, but he does not find fault *with*

*them*; where does he find them? He finds them with Christ; he himself put them there, and Christ did not put them back to us; he has put our faults eternally away; so that those who are in heaven are without fault before the throne. Finding fault with them; but finding no fault with his own people, because their faults were with Christ, and Christ has put those faults eternally away; therefore, he finds no fault with them. “He does not behold iniquity in Jacob, nor see perverseness in Israel;” and consequently, “the Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a king is in their midst.” And also, the service of God pertained unto them; but it was but a ceremonial service, and only for a time; such a service as any natural man could perform; it was a law after the order of a carnal commandment; and therefore, a carnal man could serve God in that kind of service. But then the service of God that pertains unto the new covenant is, as I have said, a spiritual service, and will last to all eternity. Hence, they shall see his face, and they shall serve him, and reign for ever and ever. “And the promises,” said the apostle, “pertained unto them;” but then those promises were conditional; but the promises of God in Christ Jesus are yea and amen; unto what? Why, unto the glory of God; and as there is not anything that can bring so much good to man as the new covenant promises of the blessed God, the natural consequence is that there is not anything that can bring so much glory to God; that that brings the most good to man brings the most glory to God; he who receives the most mercy has most to glorify God for; he who sees himself the greatest sinner has most to glorify God for; sees himself a guilty and a lost sinner; and knows that he needs all the greatness of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for the eternal salvation of his soul; and therefore, God is greatly glorified in displaying these great mercies. Thus, much then upon their possessions as a type.

Second: Let us now look at the life they were to choose. What was the life the Israelite was to choose? Not natural life:<sup>1</sup> for that he already possessed. Moses did not exhort the Israelites to choose natural life; they were living men; they possessed that; and he certainly did not exhort them to choose eternal life; Moses was better taught than that. Go on to the 32nd chapter of this book; and you will find how Moses spoke when he came to the new covenant mercies; he there brings in the Savior in the perfection of his work; he there brings in the Savior in his stability as a Rock; he there brings in the Most High in his sovereignty in finding his people out, and taking care of them. Moses, therefore, in our text did not exhort the Israelites to choose natural life; they already possessed that; nor to choose eternal life, for that he knew was a matter that was not at all with man, but altogether with God. What then was the life that he exhorted them to choose? I will show what that life was, and I will show where the death was, as the opposite of that life. The life that he exhorted them to choose may be summed up in this one sentence, which I shall have presently to refer to; it was a life of love to the true and the everlasting God in contrast to the gods of the nations. “Choose you,” said Joshua, “whom you will serve; whether the gods that your fathers served on the other side of the flood, or the gods of Egypt, or the gods of the Amorites; but as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah; we will serve the true God.” Now in this life of love to the supreme God, in distinction from other gods, they were to have freedom, as their freedom from Egypt; they were to have settlement in the happy land, in contrast to their wilderness tribulation; they were to have also safety, in contrast to everlasting exposure to war, and malice, and hating one another; they were also to have plenty, in contrast to privation and poverty; and whatever they called upon the Lord, for he would hear them and would answer them. This is the life that they

---

<sup>1</sup> Mr. John Foreman, in several pieces in *The Gospel Herald*, has written upon “Old Covenant Life and Death,” with more ability and clearness than any other writer upon that subject.

were exhorted to choose; and when they apostatized, they lost this life, they passed from freedom into bondage, they went from settlement into wandering; and they are wandering to this day; they went away from safety into danger, and were exposed to every possible calamity, as described largely in the 28th chapter of this book; they went away from plenty into privation, and from peace into tribulation. Now, that is the kind of life they were exhorted to choose; and when they passed away from God they are represented as dead. Hence, they are called “dry bones;” represented as dead and buried. So, the life he here exhorts them to choose was a life of love to the Supreme Being, with all the temporal advantages connected therewith. But it has a spiritual meaning; and we will show presently in what way the spiritual meaning here appears. Now, there was nothing in this exhortation which the natural man was not capable of understanding; any more than when you say to your children, If you are attending a school to acquire learning; if you do not give up your mind conscientiously to it, you will never succeed; and when they go into the world; if you do not give your mind up to business; if you give your mind up to pleasure; if you are thinking all day what a pleasant evening you will have at this or the other place of amusement, and so during the day you neglect what you ought to attend to, to dream of this amusement you will have at night; why, you go at night, and spend your money, injure your character, your health, your strength, and by and bye the workhouse, or the prison, or something else follows. Now, I say young people are capable of understanding this. And if you say to them, Do not neglect to attend the house of prayer; do not despise the Sabbath; you know it is right to observe the Sabbath; you know it is right to revere the Bible; you know it is right to love your neighbor; you know it is right; and if you walk in this way, though that is not saving religion, it is walking in that way that will have the approbation of your Maker; then “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth;” for although he will not accept this your consistency as an evidence of salvation, he will accept it as an expression of homage to his name; he will accept it as an expression of reverence to him; as an expression of a desire to live as a conscientious man; and to go on through the world in that way that shall be to your credit and advantage, and to the honor of that God in whose hands you breath; it is his sun, not yours, that shines upon you; it is his moon, not yours, that runs her nightly rounds; it is his stars, not yours, that sparkle in the sky; it is he that sends you plentiful harvests; it is he in reality that is the author of every shilling and every sixpence you have in your pocket: the author of your health, and of your being altogether. There is nothing in this that young people are incapable of understanding. And this is about the substance of Moses exhortation to the Jews. And hence, if you were to compare an Israelite, a natural man, guided by the word of God, and a natural man guided by heathenism; you would indeed see that the Israelites, when contrasted with the degradation, the obscenities and the awful doings of the heathen, were a happy people. But pray don’t let us put this into the place of the work of the blessed Spirit; don’t let us tell our children that that will do; let us rather speak to them in that way that shall convince them that nothing will do short of the fulfilment of that great truth, “Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Therefore, choose life. Just as Moses said to the Israelites in this moral, temporal sense, “Choose life;” we say to every man in that sense, “Choose life;” we say to our children and neighbors, and everyone, in that sense, “Choose life.” But then, this and matters that are eternal are essentially different; as different as Moses and Christ; as different as the doings of the creature and the doings of the Great Creator. We thus see, friends, the sort of life they were to choose, that they were to live; and when they apostatized from God, they became dead to him and buried; not dead from their being, not dead from their natural life. Hence, the Jewish nation is preserved to this day; it is not in an organized form; but there it is there are materials enough to make a nation now, if those materials were all gathered together. But then you will see that the life they have

lived for 1800 years has been, if I may use such an expression, a life of death; they have existed in this covenant death, in this moral death from God, and the standing they originally had. Let me run through some of the main parts of the paragraph, and then come to the Christian. Now, said Moses, "See, I have set before you this day life and good;" we have seen what kind of life it was and what kind of good it was; "and death and evil;" death from these privileges, and the evil that would follow thereupon. "In that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God shall bless the land wherever you go to possess it. But if your heart turns away, so that you will not hear, but shall be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I announce unto you this day, that you shall surely perish. I call heaven and earth to record, this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life, that both you and your seed may live." You see what kind of life it is, what kind of death it is, what kind of good it is, what kind of evil it is, what kind of blessing it is, what kind of curse it is, which they were capable of choosing. Now, these few remarks I hope are enough to show that the exhortation is not to choose natural life; they possessed that; nor to choose eternal life, for that is a matter that lies beyond their caprice or choice altogether. Why then, say you, you would not exhort the natural man to choose eternal life: why, if I exhort the natural man to choose eternal life, I belie that man's condition; I belie God's counsels; and in that respect I am deceiving the man. What would you do then? I would tell the man, "Except you be born again, you cannot see the kingdom of God;" I would tell the man what and where he is under sin and the law; I would tell him the truth; and I must leave the effect. If I were to exhort him to choose eternal life, I should belie the man's condition; he is dead. Only think if when the fiery serpent had slain thousands of the Israelites, Moses had come to these Israelites, and exhorted them in the language of our text, "Choose life;" no answer, no hearing; they were all dead. Ah, but, say you, suppose the Lord sent him. Yes, if the Lord sent the prophet to speak to the dead; but then he will not speak to them as though they could help themselves; he will speak to them in their real character. Hear the word of the Lord, you that ought to hear it; you that can hear it; you that are capable of hearing it; no, but oh you dry bones, hear you the word of the Lord, but then these were bones chosen by the Lord; "He brought me into the valley; and the valley was full of bones, very many and very dry." Ah, says the Lord, these are my bones; and there is the promise, "Your dead men shall live; with my dead body shall they arise." "O you dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." What has that to do with general exhortation? The prophet did not run about to all the sepulchers in Babylon or in the world and exhort them in that way. There were many corpses in the graves round where the Savior was, but it was only to one he said, "Come forth." Just so here with the dry bones, there is nothing there to authorize the exhorting a natural man to do what God alone can do. "And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, you know;" it lies entirely with yourself; they can do nothing; I can do nothing; O Lord, you know whether you have life for them or not. I have life for them; and therefore, "Prophesy unto these bones;" the word shall go with power; "And there was a noise, and a shaking among the dry bones." Who caused them to make a noise? Did they cause themselves to do so? And there was a shaking; did they cause themselves to make that shaking? "And the bones came together, bone to bone; did they cause themselves to come together? Did they themselves lay sinew upon sinew? Did they themselves clothe themselves with flesh? Did they themselves cover themselves with skin? Did they themselves acquire breath? Was not every department entirely the work of the blessed God, until they stood upon their feet, an exceeding great army?

I shall now show how the Lord Jesus Christ meets every part of this paragraph; for though I have taken these few words as a text, I shall glance at the whole paragraph, "I have, set before you this day life and good." Let us look at the whole paragraph as addressed to Christ; for Christ stood in a conditional position: he had a law to fulfil, and certain covenants, or rather a covenant to establish. "I have set before you life and good." Now here is a resurrection life, a life of eternal glory, set before Christ; he looks at it; he looks at that resurrection life, he looks at that glorification life; he looks at all his people with him in that life, and the contemplation of it filled him with more joy than his sufferings could fill him with sorrow, therefore, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame." "Life and good:" eternal life, resurrection life, set before Christ; the "good" was a fullness of joy. But said Moses also, "Death and evil:" so we set death and evil before Christ; we throw death in his way; we, by sin, threw death in his way, evil in his way, the curse in his way; that is what we have all done in the fall of Adam. Yet, though the Savior saw this death in the way, did that turn him back? No! Though he saw this evil, the evil of our sin, in the way, did that turn him back? No! Though he saw the curse in the way, did that turn him back? No! O, death, you have been the plague of my people, I will be your plague now! O, grave, I will be your destruction! As for evil, I will take it away, that my people shall not see it anymore; and as for the curse, I will be made a curse for them. Now Moses had to set life and good, death and evil, before the Israelites; but the gospel sets before the believer life and good, but not death and evil; they are gone. See how it lights up this paragraph to bring the Savior in. "I write," said John, "unto you, that you may know that you have eternal life; and this life is in his Son." he has taken away death, and evil, and the curse. Then, said Moses, "That you may love the Lord your God." Ah, that is what the Savior did in perfection. However, I may fail, he never failed; however, I may rise and fall in my feelings and affections, Christ never altered; he lived and died in the full tide of boundless love to God and to man. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as thyself; and keep his commandments." Ah! Jesus Christ has done that. "And his statutes and his judgments." Is there one statute Christ did not keep? "That you may multiply." And has he not multiplied? Has there been a generation now for centuries in which there have not been souls brought to Christ by Christ coming to them? I have seen some hundreds in my time and hope to see hundreds more yet. So that he does live, and he is multiplying. "And the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are going, to possess it." Does he not possess the land? and is he not blessed? and we are just as sure to be blessed as he is blessed, if we be his people, and loved with the same love wherewith he is loved. See then in this paragraph how nicely it answers to bring in Christ. "But if your heart turns away;" did Jesus's heart every turn away? No, say you, never. There are many mysterious windings, and wanderings among his people even after called by grace; but that cannot ruin them, because Jesus's heart never turned away. "So that you will not hear, but shall be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them." Did he throw himself, in obedience to Satan, from the pinnacle of the temple? No; he was a Rock that the serpent found invulnerable. Did he, as an act of obedience to the adversary, command the stones to be made bread? No; "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Did he, as an act of obedience to Satan, for the sake of obtaining the kingdoms of this world, fall down and worship him? No! no! Jesus's heart never strayed. You may depend upon it, that is the way to get over the old covenant, to take Christ with you. Take him with you, you can walk through the law comfortably, but if you do not take Christ with you through the law, you will find the truth of Solomon's words, or rather, you will be obliged to give the negative answer, "Can a man walk upon burning coals, and his feet not be burned?" So, you will find in the law; but take Christ with you as the end of the law, there is no fire then; "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and not be

burned?" If you take the commandments into your bosom, and determine to be as holy as they are, you will pretty soon burn your clothes up; you would find a fiery companion with you, and you would, be glad to have a change. But when God takes you off law ground and puts you on to gospel ground, it will be like taking you from walking on coals of fire to walk on the green grass. So, then Jesus Christ never worshipped or served other gods. "I announce unto you this day, that you shall surely perish;" ah, but he could not perish, and that you shall not prolong your days upon the land, from where you passed over Jordan to go to possess it." But notice, "He shall prolong his days; he shall see his seed and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his (the Great Redeemers) hands." And we can never perish unless Christ first perishes. He is our life; and he as our life must first give way before we can die; he is our sanctification; I have not a particle of holiness without Christ, and "Without holiness shall no man see the Lord." His righteousness must cease to be what it is before I can have a drawback or fault before God. Christ has chosen this eternal life for himself, and his people too. He knows how to make them choose it too; he knows how to make them choose what he has chosen; yes, as the Apostle beautifully words it, "I apprehend that for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." He laid hold of me for a certain purpose; the ultimate purpose of which of course is eternal life and I apprehend, choose, lay hold of, seek after, the very thing that he apprehended me for; so that he and I now are of one mind. But let us go on to the last verse of this chapter, and see how nicely the Savior comes in, and takes away the *ifs*, and *buts*, and *maybes*, and deaths, and evils, and curses of this old covenant; as the Apostle expresses it, "Blotted out the hand writing which was against us;" he endured that part that was against us; that is the part he blotted out, and took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross. Let us go on to the end of this life, the ultimate glory of it. "That you may love the Lord your God, and that you may obey his voice; and that you may cleave unto him; for he is your life, and the length of your days;" and so the Father has appointed Christ to reign for ever and ever; "That you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers; to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them:" and so Christ has secured for his people an eternal Canaan, "a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."