

# A Simple Solution to A Puzzling Problem

## THE PROBLEM OUTLINED

**"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, and to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."**

Here the Apostle Paul appears to state unequivocally that all the promises made to Abraham regarding his "seed" referred, not to his multiplied seed, but to Christ alone.

How many theological battles have been fought over this passage, and with what negative results!

The basic problem is that the word "seed," in Hebrew and Greek, as in English, may refer to one seed or to many, to a single seed or to a bagfull. In the latter case the word is used as a collective noun, thus in *both* cases the singular form is used. If I had a barn filled with individual seeds, it would be correctly referred to as "a barn full of *seed*." The plural form would *never* be used in such a case, *unless* a variety of *kinds* of seed were referred to: e. g., "The store carries twenty-four different seeds." But even then it would be more customary to say: "The store carries twenty-four different *kinds* of *seed*." It is evident that the Apostle Paul, in Gal. 3: 16, is not referring to a *variety* of seeds, however, so the problem remains: Why does he argue that the Holy Spirit's use of the word "seed," in the promises made to Abraham and his progeny, proves that He was referring to only *one particular* seed: Christ?

Albert Barnes, meeting this problem head-on in his commentary on Galatians, rightly says:

"Now no one ever probably read this passage without feeling a difficulty, and without asking himself whether this argument is sound, and is worthy of a man of candor, and especially of an inspired man."

The difficulties increase as we go to the particular passages in which God made the promises referred to, for very clearly *not one* of them refers to one particular seed, but *all* very obviously refer to *multiplied* seed!

This makes it appear all the more that Paul, in Gal. 3:16, was seeking to win a point by the use of sophistry; by taking illegitimate advantage of the Holy Spirit's use of a word.

When this writer was still a young pastor and had barely begun to take a stand for "the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery," he received a striking letter from the president of a popular Christian College.

Said the president in effect: "I am an antidispensationalist, and you are generally considered an ultra-dispensationalist, but this I firmly believe: Either you are right or I am right, but the Bible teachers in between are certainly wrong." He referred to those who believed that the Body of Christ had its historical beginning with Peter and the eleven at Pentecost.

Very graciously he invited me and any of my friends to spend one or more evenings with him at the college to discuss the matter.

Several of us accepted his invitation, but our discussion centered almost exclusively around one verse: Galatians 3:16! We couldn't seem to get away from it.

This passage, he contended, was the Holy Spirit's own exegesis, or explanation, of the promises made to Abraham. He insisted that no matter how plainly the promises themselves seemed to refer to Abraham's *multiplied* seed, God *Himself* says in Gal. 3:16 that they referred to *one particular* Seed alone: Christ.

We, on the other hand, contended that if God made promises to Abraham which obviously referred to his *multiplied* seed, but actually meant them to apply to only *one particular* seed, He was not being honest with Abraham. This we both agreed could not be the case, but it shows how important it is that we understand Gal. 3:16 correctly for the veracity, the trustworthiness, of God Himself is involved.

Before examining the original promises referred to, may we make one important suggestion to our readers, and particularly to our younger pastors? When you are faced with what appears to be an insoluble problem in Scripture: some seeming contradiction, perhaps, do *not* strain or force the meaning of any Scripture passage so as to arrive at some solution which may seem acceptable to you. Rather, *wait, just wait and pray for further light.*

But must we then accept so apparent a contradiction as that outlined above? Is it possible that Gal. 3:16 is the divine exegesis, God's own interpretation, of the promises made to Abraham? Let us be Bereans and search the Scriptures to see whether this is so. Let us see whether these promises can be fairly interpreted to refer to one single Seed: Christ.

## **THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM AND HIS SEED**

The first promise made to Abraham (then still called Abram) is found in Gen. 12:1-3:

**"Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from they kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee:**

**"AND I WILL MAKE OF THEE A GREAT NATION, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:**

**"And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."**

This promise was confirmed and enlarged upon several times, as we learn from the book of Genesis.

**Gen 13:14-16: "And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward.**

**"For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.**

**"AND I WILL MAKE THY SEED AS THE DUST OF THE EARTH: SO THAT IF A MAN CAN NUMBER THE DUST OF THE EARTH, THEN SHALL THY SEED ALSO BE NUMBERED."**

**Gen. 15:5: "And He brought him forth abroad, and said, LOOK NOW TOWARD HEAVEN, AND TELL [COUNT] THE STARS, IF THOU BE ABLE TO NUMBER THEM: AND HE SAID UNTO HIM, SO SHALL THY SEED BE."**

**Gen. 17:6-8: "AND I WILL MAKE THEE EXCEEDING FRUITFUL, AND I WILL MAKE NATIONS OF THEE, AND KINGS SHALL COME OUT OF THEE.**

**"And I will establish My covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee in THEIR generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.**

**"And I will give unto thee and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be THEIR God."**

**Gen. 22:17,18: "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."**

Who could read the passages above with unbiased mind and question that in all these promises God had the *multiplied* seed of Abraham in mind and that Abraham would surely understand them so?

Concerning the passage last cited above, Barnes remarks (in dealing with Gal. 3:16) that obviously it refers to Abraham's multiplied seed "without *any* particular reference to an individual," and adds: "Such would be the fair and natural interpretation should it be read by hundreds or thousands of persons who had never heard of the interpretation here put upon it by Paul."

But we are not yet through, for remember, the apostle says in Gal. 3:16: "To Abraham and his seed were the promises made." Not "of" or "concerning" (though this is also true), but "*to*," and we do indeed see these promises already confirmed to Isaac and Jacob in the very first book of the Bible, and then later to the children of Israel as a nation. And again Abraham's *multiplied* seed is unmistakably in view.

Note first the confirmation made to Isaac:

**Gen. 26:4: "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."**

And the further confirmation to Jacob is no less emphatic in its reference, not to one seed, but to many:

**Gen. 28:14: "AND 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."**

Perhaps the reader has noticed that already these promises in Genesis have been made to Abraham and *more* than "one" of his seed: Isaac *and* Jacob, but certainly these promises were made indirectly to more than these: to Abraham's greatly-multiplied seed.

It should be noted here that nowhere does God state that *all* of Abraham's seed are intended. Indeed the implication is clearly otherwise, for these promises were confirmed, not to Ishmael, but to Isaac; not to Esau, but to Jacob. That is, the multiplied seed through whom the world would some day be blessed would

come through Isaac and then Jacob, from whom the "children of Israel" sprang. And it was even a certain generation of these that God had in mind. But all this is perfectly consistent with the promises cited above, while it would scarcely be honest of God to make such promises if He did *not* plan to bless the world through Abraham's multiplied seed, but only through his single Seed: Christ.

## MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

But there is still more to consider before we go to the solution of this problem.

It is clear that *Moses and the prophets* understood these promises to refer to Abraham's multiplied seed. Here we could quote scores, perhaps hundreds of passages in confirmation, but a few will have to suffice.

As Moses stood before the children of Israel at **Kadesh-Barnea**, just across Jordan from the land of Canaan, he proclaimed the divine challenge:

**"Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land WHICH THE LORD SWARE UNTO YOUR FATHERS, ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB, TO GIVE UNTO THEM AND TO THEIR SEED AFTER THEM."**

**"THE LORD YOUR GOD HATH MULTIPLIED YOU, AND, BEHOLD, YE ARE THIS DAY AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN FOR MULTITUDE."**

**"Behold, the Lord thy God hath set the land before thee: go up and possess it .... "(Deut. 1:8,10,21).**

*Isaiah* surely understood God's promises as referring to Abraham's multiplied seed when he predicted concerning redeemed Israel:

**"Arise and shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.**

**"For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee.**

**"And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the *brightness* of thy rising" (Isa. 60:1-3).**

*Jeremiah* surely understood it so when he declared:

**"And I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries whither I have driven them, and will bring them again to their folds; AND THEY SHALL BE FRUITFUL AND INCREASE."**

**"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.**

**"In His days JUDAH SHALL BE SAVED, AND ISRAEL SHALL DWELL SAFELY .... "(Jer. 23:3,5,6).**

To be sure, these blessings will come to Israel and Judah in the days of Messiah's reign, but it is still the *multiplied* seed to whom these blessings are promised.

Most certainly the prophet *Zechariah* too understood all these promises so:

**"AND IT SHALL COME TO PASS, THAT AS YE WERE A CURSE AMONG THE NATIONS, O HOUSE OF JUDAH, AND HOUSE OF ISRAEL; SO WILL I SAVE YOU AND YE SHALL BE A BLESSING .... "**

**"THUS SAITH THE LORD OF HOSTS: IN THOSE DAYS IT SHALL COME TO PASS THAT TEN MEN SHALL TAKE HOLD, OUT OF ALL LANGUAGES OF THE NATIONS, EVEN SHALL TAKE HOLD OF THE SKIRT OF HIM THAT IS A JEW, SAYING, WE WILL GO WITH YOU; FOR WE HAVE HEARD THAT GOD IS WITH YOU" (Zech. 8:13, 23).**

Surely this must refer to the multiplied seed of Abraham. It *could not* refer to Christ. Was Christ "a curse among the nations"? Did Christ have to be "saved" to become a blessing to them? These two verses from Zechariah 8 establish beyond the shadow of a doubt that it was God's plan - and it still is - to bless the nations through the *multiplied* seed of Abraham.

Does this all change when we come to the so-called "New Testament"? In no wise, for our Lord and His disciples went to none but "*unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" ([Matt. 10:5,6](#); [15:24](#)) simply *because* according to all covenant and prophecy Israel had to be saved before she could become a blessing to the Gentiles.

Did the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, then, bring about a change in this plan? No, for *after* Pentecost we find Peter declaring to an audience of Israelites:

**"Ye are the children of the prophets, AND OF THE COVENANT WHICH GOD MADE WITH OUR FATHERS, SAYING UNTO ABRAHAM, AND IN THY SEED SHALL ALL THE KINDREDS OF THE EARTH BE BLESSED.**

**"UNTO YOU FIRST GOD, HAVING RAISED UP HIS SON JESUS, SENT HIM TO BLESS YOU IN TURNING AWAY EVERY ONE OF YOU FROM HIS INIQUITIES" (Acts 3:25,26; and cf. Vers. 19-21).**

Our Reformed and Presbyterian brethren have long held that God is through with Israel, that the Church is spiritual Israel and Christ the King of the Church, now sitting on David's "spiritual" throne in heaven. But this is arbitrarily altering the plain Word of God and, indeed, is contrary to reason.

Finally, Paul himself declares to the Roman believers:

**"I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits: that blindness in part is happened to Israel, UNTIL the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.**

**"And so ALL ISRAEL SHALL BE SAVED, AS IT IS WRITTEN.. ." (Rom. 11:25,26).**

With this present dispensation of the mystery and Gentile blessing through Israel's *fall* in view, the apostle says in the same chapter:

**"For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall *the receiving of them* be, but life from the dead?" (Ver. 15).**

Now it is evident that the latter "them" in this passage must be the same "them" as the former "them." The latter cannot possibly refer to the Church, but to Israel, the nation which has been temporarily cast away. Verses 23 and 24 further confirm this.

What then is the explanation of Paul's words in Gal. 3:16: *"He saith not, And to seeds, as of many, but as of one, And to thy Seed, which is Christ"?*

We can well see how our covenant brethren came to the conclusion that the promises to Abraham and his physical seed must be "spiritualized," for Paul clearly stated to the rejecting Jews of **Pisidian Antioch**:

**"... It was necessary that the Word of God should first have been spoken to you, BUT SEEING YE PUT IT FROM YOU AND JUDGE YOURSELVES UNWORTHY OF EVERLASTING LIFE, LO, WE TURN TO THE GENTILES" (Acts 13:46).**

At first sight, and without the rest of Paul's epistles and the Word in general to guide us, it might well be gathered from this and similar passages that God was casting Israel aside forever.

Indeed, in Rom. 11:11 Paul himself declares that *now "through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles."*

But the so-called "spiritualization" of the Old Testament promises is really nothing less than an arbitrary altering of them by theologians so as to make them conform to their own systems of *doctrine* - *and we have no right to alter the written Word of God*. Moreover, Paul himself makes it crystal clear that the casting away of Israel is only temporary (See again [Rom. 11:12, 15,23-26](#)).

## THE GLORIOUS SOLUTION

Why, then, does Paul say in Gal. 3:16:

**"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made, He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."**

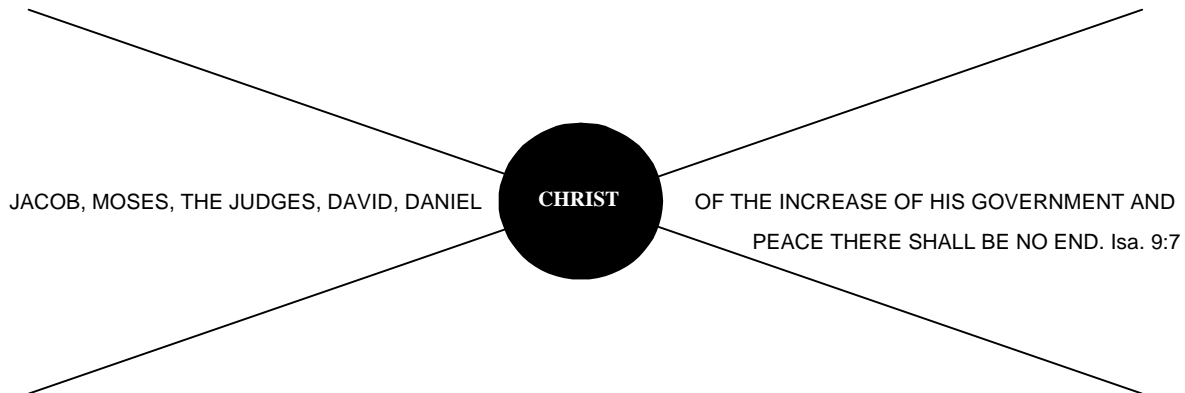
In the light of the promises themselves and all their confirmations in the Book of Genesis; in the light of all the further confirmations in the law and the prophets; in the light of Peter's plain words in Acts 3:25,26, and in the light of Paul's own epistle to the Romans is it not crystal clear that God planned - and plans - to bless the Gentile nations through *Israel*, Abraham's *multiplied* seed? Would it not be foolish and wrong to conclude from one passage, Gal. 3:16, that all these promises referred to one single Seed: Christ? To such a view the words of the puzzled little girl to her mother are rightly applied. She asked: "Mother, if God didn't mean what He said, why didn't He say what He meant?"!

But God *did* mean exactly what He said, and the wonderful, satisfying solution to this problem, as to so many others, is to be found in the mystery revealed by the glorified Lord to and through Paul. As Pastor J. C. O'Hair has pointed out so beautifully in his book, *Daniel's Secret, Paul's Mystery, John's Revelation*, whenever it appears that God's prophetic program *cannot* be fulfilled, God reveals a secret that provides a glorious and satisfying answer.

Perhaps it will help at this point first to notice what the verse does *not* say. It does *not* say that God would *not* bless Abraham's multiplied seed, or through them the world. It does *not* say that God would bless *only* Christ, the single Seed, and make Him *alone* a blessing to the world, though *in a sense* this is true, for all blessing flows from Him. The Apostle simply states that in making the promises to Abraham and his progeny, God used the word "seed," which is singular in form, and that He did this because He had Christ in view. In other words, God specially avoided the use of plural words which might have been used, such as "in thy *children*," "in thy *descendants*," etc., for there was no generation of Abraham's offspring who, in themselves, could have proved a blessing to the world.

Perhaps the following diagram will help to explain the simple solution to the problem we have wrestled with.





Considering the above diagram in a general way as representing the history of Abraham's physical seed, through which generation of that seed could the world possibly have been blessed? Through Jacob and his generation? Jacob himself swindled his brother out of the birthright and blessing and his life from then on is a long story of human failure. Little wonder Psalm 146:5 declares: "Happy is he that hath the God of *Jacob* for his *help*, whose *hope* is in the Lord his God," for Jacob and his whole generation surely needed God's *help*.

Could the world have been blessed, then, through Moses' generation? Hardly, for under Moses Israel constantly murmured and complained and rebelled. He called them "a stiffnecked people" ([Ex. 33:3](#); *et al*), and indeed, Moses himself was not free from many human failures.

Could the world have been blessed through the generation of the Judges, then? Far from it, for Judges 17:6: "*Every man did that which was right in his own eyes,*" explains why the history of the Judges contains with wearying monotony the phrase: "*And Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord.*" How could they have been a blessing to the other nations?

Could David's generation have been the one to bring blessing to the world? How could they, when David himself, though a man after God's own heart, was guilty of adultery and murder, and when but recently Israel had rejected God and had cried for a king to reign over them "like the other nations"?

And as to Daniel's generation: by this time God's people had departed so far from Him that He had delivered them into the hand of the Babylonians.

Please glance now at the above chart and note how the possibility of blessing to the world through Israel's multiplied seed *diminishes steadily* until we get to one Person - just *one* of the seed of Abraham: the *Lord Jesus Christ*.

Does it follow, then, that God's promises concerning the multiplied seed will not be fulfilled because they forfeited the blessing through failure and unbelief, and that therefore the nations will be blessed through Christ alone?

Not exactly. Are we hedging when we answer the question in this way? No, for God will indeed bless the world through the *multiplied* seed of Abraham; this had been proven, not only by the unconditional promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also by repeated prophetic confirmations both before and after Pentecost. However, Israel will never become the world's blesser until she becomes so *through Christ*; until she has been "saved" through Christ, her "Redeemer," for the blessing of the world is wrapped up in Him - in Him alone.

Note that Christ is the focal point in the above outline. All blessing is centered in Him and must be found in Him. God has been demonstrating this for the past nineteen hundred years. Hear some of Paul's Spirit-inspired statements on this subject:

**II Cor. 5:17: "Therefore if any man be IN CHRIST, he is [or "there is"] a new creation .... "**

**II Cor. 5:21: "For God hath made Him to be sin for us, [Him] who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God IN HIM."**

**Gal. 2:20: "I am crucified WITH CHRIST; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God,<sup>3</sup> who loved me, and gave Himself for me."**

**Eph. 1:6: "To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted IN THE BELOVED [ONE]."**

**Eph. 1:7: "IN WHOM we have redemption, through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."**

**Eph. 1: 11: "IN WHOM we also have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will."**

**Eph. 1:13: "IN WHOM ye also trusted ... IN WHOM ... ye were sealed ... "**

**Eph. 3:6: "That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise IN CHRIST by the gospel"**

**Phil. 3:8,9: "Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may win Christ,**

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<sup>3</sup> Note carefully: "by *the faith of*," not my faith in. Faith is referred to here subjectively: our Lord's *worthiness* to be *believed*. See the author's booklet, *The Faith of Christ*.

**"And be found IN HIM, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ,<sup>4</sup> the righteousness which is of God by faith."**

**Col. 2:6,7: 'As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye IN HIM;**

**"Rooted and built up IN HIM . . . "**

**Col. 2:9,10: "For IN HIM dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.**

**"And ye are complete IN HIM, who is the Head of all principality and power."**

**Col. 2:12: "Buried WITH HIM in baptism, wherein also ye are risen WITH HIM, through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead."**

Truly *"it pleased the Father that IN HIM should all fulness dwell"* (Col. 1:19). What do you want, unsaved friend, that is worth anything at all: forgiveness? peace? joy? assurance? They are to be found in Him and in Him alone. He is the Fount of every blessing, the Source of all supply. And what, dear Christian friend, do you have that is worthwhile that is of yourself? Nothing. All you have and are, you have and are *in Him*.

You have "redemption . . . the forgiveness of sins" *in Him*, because you were crucified *with Him*, and buried and raised *with Him*. You have been made "the righteousness of God" *in Him*, and God now "accepts" you *in Him*. You are "a new creation" *in Him* and have "obtained an inheritance," a most glorious one, *in Him*. God now sees you *in Him* and has pronounced you "complete *in Him*."

For nineteen hundred years God has been teaching this lesson, and not until Israel sees it and stops trying to "establish their own righteousness," humbly receiving Christ and the riches of His grace, will the blessing overflow to the other nations. *Then* all nations will be blessed through Israel, *through Christ!*

Thus Paul, in Gal. 3:16, does not imply that God will not fulfill the promises to Abraham's multiplied seed. He only points out that God used a *compound*, or *collective* noun in making these promises since He knew that the multiplied seed could not *in themselves* prove a blessing to the world. It is *redeemed Israel* that will bless the world ([Zech. 8:13](#); [Rom. 11:26](#)): *through Christ*.

Thus, even the word "seed," in Gal. 3:16, while singular in form ("Not many. . . but one"), is still plural in fact, for as we have said: we use the word "seed,"

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<sup>4</sup> See foregoing footnote.

whether of one single seed or of a bagfull. Moreover, any one seed *contains* much seed, potentially. This agrees with our Lord's words in John 12:24:

**"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn [kernel] of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."**

One more thing: As the possibility of world blessing through Abraham's multiplied seed diminished until Christ's appearance and redemptive work, so it will grow and expand once the favored nation is "saved" and finds her place *in Christ*. You say, "Christ is Israel's *Messiah*, her *King*; she does not belong to His Body?" True, for the revelation about the Body of Christ is a high truth indeed. But morally and spiritually every man stands before God, either in Adam or in Christ. We can no more divorce ourselves from Adam than can the leaf from the twig or the twig from the branch or the branch from the bough, or the bough from the tree, *unless* we are *redeemed*: taken out of Adam, as it were, and given a position in *Christ*. This was so even of those who were saved before Paul was entrusted with "the revelation of the mystery," or was even converted to Christ, for in Rom. 16:7 he refers to some who were "*in Christ before me*."

Unsaved friend, will you learn the lesson God is teaching today, as He forms "the Church which is His [Christ's] Body"? The lesson is simply that there is no true blessing to be found anywhere but *in Christ* and that *you* cannot possibly be a true blessing to anyone else, except *in Christ*.

Our generation is constantly emphasizing relevancy. Well then, this is the most relevant truth of all. Accept it and not only will your life be filled with meaning and purpose, but the blessing will overflow to others.