

Part 17: The Kingdom Promises to David

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the significance of the Davidic covenant and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, emphasizing a literal interpretation of biblical promises.

Scripture: Luke 1:31

Topics: "Davidic Covenant", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significance of the Davidic covenant in the Old Testament doctrine of premillennialism, emphasizing its enduring promises to David's seed, throne, and kingdom. The covenant is often overlooked by amillenarians who spiritualize prophecies, leading to a neglect of the literal interpretation intended by David and the Jews. The covenant assures an eternal throne and kingdom for David's posterity, with Christ fulfilling this covenant as the rightful heir to the throne. The New Testament confirms Christ as the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, with a distinction between His present session and His future righteous reign on earth during the millennium.

Transcript

Next in importance to the Abrahamic covenant in the Old Testament doctrine of premillennialism stands the Davidic covenant--the promises of God to David that his seed, throne, and kingdom would endure forever. This covenant has been obscured and ignored by most amillenarians and again and again statements are made that premillennialism rests solely upon the interpretation of Revelation 20. Louis Berkhof in his discussion of "the premillennial theory" states, "The only Scriptural basis for this theory is Rev 20:1-6, after an Old Testament content has been poured into it." [1] Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p. 715. In other words it is expressly denied that the Old Testament or the New provides any teaching at all on an earthly millennial kingdom. One of the reasons for such an unwarranted conclusion is the neglect of the Biblical covenants of the Old Testament of which the Davidic is prominent. The principle of spiritualization of all prophecies, which would teach premillennialism, is carried through with precision by the amillenarians with the result that by a process of changing the meaning of the promises they are robbed of their content. A study of amillenarian interpretation of the Davidic covenant well illustrates this method. Accepting as literal those prophecies which do not affect the premillennial argument and spiritualizing all others, they are able with straight face to declare that the Old Testament does not teach a millennial kingdom on earth. On the contrary, premillennarians believe these promises were intended to be interpreted literally as most certainly David understood them and as the Jews living in the time of Christ anticipated. A study of this covenant will afford another strong confirmation of premillennial doctrine. [2] For

a previous presentation of this same truth see Bibliotheca Sacra, "The Fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant," April-June 1945, pp. 153-66 by the same author. Portions of this material are reproduced in this article. The classic work on this theme is George N. H. Peters' The Theocratic Kingdom, recently republished by Kregel Publications in three volumes of over 2,000 pages.

Analysis of the Promise to David

David had the godly ambition to build a temple to Jehovah. The incongruity of allowing the ark of God to remain in a temporary tentlike tabernacle while he himself lived in the luxury of a house of cedar seemed to call for the erection of a suitable permanent building to be the center of worship. To Nathan, the prophet, was revealed that God intended David to build something more enduring than any material edifice. David's "house" was to be his posterity and through them his throne and his kingdom were to continue forever. The main features of the covenant are included in the following passage: "When thy days are fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, that shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son: if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men; but my lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thy house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever" (2 Sam 7:12-16, A.S.V.).

The provisions of the Davidic covenant include, then, the following items: (1) David is to have a child, yet to be born, who shall succeed him and establish his kingdom. (2) This son (Solomon) shall build the temple instead of David. (3) The throne of his kingdom shall be established forever. (4) The throne will not be taken away from him (Solomon) even though his sins justify chastisement. (5) David's house, throne, and kingdom shall be established forever.

To Solomon, then, was promised a throne which would be established forever. To David was promised a posterity, a throne, and a kingdom to be established forever. The promise is clear that the throne passed on through Solomon to David's posterity was never to be abolished. It is not clear whether the posterity of David should be through the line of Solomon. It will be shown that this fine point in the prophecy was occasioned by the cutting off of the posterity of Solomon as far as the throne is concerned.

What do the major terms of the covenant mean? By David's "house" it can hardly be doubted that reference is made to David's posterity, his physical descendants. It is assured that they will never be slain in toto, nor displaced by another family entirely. The line of David will always be the royal line. By the term "throne" it is clear that no reference is made to a material throne, but rather to the dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king. The right to rule always belonged to David's seed. By the term "kingdom" there is reference to David's political kingdom over Israel. By the expression "for ever" it is signified that the Davidic authority and Davidic kingdom or rule over Israel shall never be taken from David's posterity. The right to rule will never be transferred to another family, and its arrangement is designed for eternal perpetuity. Whatever its changing form, temporary interruptions, or chastisements, the line of David will always have the right to rule over Israel and will, in fact, exercise this privilege. This then, in brief, is the covenant of God with David.

Old Testament Confirmation

It should be clear to anyone who interprets the Old Testament prophecies literally that the entire theme of Messianic prophecy confirms the Davidic promises. The great kingdom promises of Isaiah, Jeremiah,

Ezekiel, and Daniel combine with the Minor Prophets in reiterating the theme of the coming Immanuel and His kingdom upon the earth. Isaiah wrote of this, "Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever" (Isa 9:7). Again Isaiah writes, "With righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked" (Isa 11:4). Such passages can be multiplied.

Not only are there many general kingdom promises but there is also specific confirmation of the Davidic covenant. Psalm 89 reiterates the content and makes the covenant immutable and sure even though Israel sins: "I have made a covenant with my chosen. I have sworn unto David my servant, Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah... My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah."

Fulfillment at the First Advent of Christ

While modern liberalism does not concern itself with the fulfillment of the promises to David, conservative scholars whether amillennial or premillennial are agreed at least that Jesus Christ is the one who fulfills the Davidic covenant. This is the import of the testimony of the angel to Mary: "And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Luke 1:31-33). The promises to David are therefore transferred to Jesus Christ and we do not need to look for another.

The problem of fulfillment does not consist in the question of whether Christ is the one who fulfills the promises, but rather on the issue of how Christ fulfills the covenant and when He fulfills it. Concerning this question, there have been two principal answers: (1) Christ fulfills the promise by His present session at the right hand of the Father in heaven; (2) Christ fulfills the promise of His return and righteous reign on earth during the millennium. Interpreters of Scripture have usually adopted an answer to the problem which fits their larger system of doctrine. Those who deny a millennium or who identify Israel and the church are apt to insist that Christ is fulfilling the covenant by His present session.[3] Cf. Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God*, and Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church*. Those who believe in a literal millennium and a reign of Christ on earth affirm the second answer. In this obvious contradiction between two systems of interpretation, there are certain issues which determine the outcome. These issues may be reduced for our purpose to the following: (1) Does the Davidic covenant require literal fulfillment? (2) Does the partial fulfillment already a matter of history permit a literal fulfillment? (3) Is the interpretation of this covenant in harmony with other covenant purposes of God? (4) What does the New Testament teach regarding the present and future reign of Christ?

Does the Davidic Covenant Require Literal Fulfillment?

If it were not for the difficulty of contradicting certain systems of interpretation of Scripture, it is doubtful whether anyone would have thought of interpreting the Davidic covenant otherwise than as requiring a literal fulfillment. The arguments in favor of literal interpretation are so massive in their construction and so difficult to waive that they are more commonly ignored by those who do not want to believe in literal fulfillment than answered by argument. Peters in *The Theocratic Kingdom*, Proposition 52, has listed no less than twenty-one arguments in favor of literal interpretation, not to include collateral material. His important arguments for literal interpretation may be summarized as follows: (1) the solemn character of the covenant which was confirmed by an oath. (2) A spiritual fulfillment would not be becoming to a solemn covenant. (3) Both David and Solomon apparently understood it to be literal (2 Sam 7:18-29; 2 Chron 6:14-16). (4) The language used, which is also used by the prophets, denotes a literal throne and kingdom. (5) The Jews plainly expected a literal fulfillment. (6) The throne and kingdom as a promise and inheritance belong to the humanity of Christ as the seed of David rather than belong to His deity. (7) There is no ground for identifying David's throne and the Father's throne. (8) A symbolical interpretation of the covenant leaves its interpretation to man. (9) The literal fulfillment is requisite to the display of God's government in the earth, necessary to the restoration and exaltation of the Jewish nation and deliverance of the earth from the curse. (10) Literal fulfillment is necessary to preserve the Divine unity of purpose.

Unless all of these weighty arguments be dismissed as utterly without foundation, it must be clear that there are good and important reasons for adopting a literal interpretation of the covenant promises. If a literal interpretation be adopted, the present session of Christ is not a fulfillment of the covenant, and it must be referred to the future. It is clear that at the present time Christ is not in any literal sense reigning over the kingdom of David. From the content and circumstances surrounding the Davidic covenant, it is evident that a literal fulfillment is anticipated.

Does the Historical Partial Fulfillment Permit a Literal Interpretation?

There are, however, obvious difficulties in interpreting the Davidic covenant in a literal way and expecting a literal fulfillment. The covenant was given almost three thousand years ago, and history has not contained any continuous development or continued authority of the political kingdom of David. A question may be raised whether history permits a literal fulfillment of the covenant. Does not the fact, viz., of Israel's captivity, with the downfall of the kingdom of Israel argue against a literal fulfillment? Do not the centuries which have elapsed since the coming of Christ prove that no literal fulfillment is intended? If we believe that no word of God is broken, it is obvious that an interpretation which is not sustained by historic fulfillment is a wrong interpretation. The amillennial solution to this problem is that there is both a historical and a spiritual fulfillment. It is historical in that a literal descendant of David was born--Christ; it is spiritual in that the kingdom perpetuated and the throne are not literally David's but God's.[4] Cf. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, unabridged edition, (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, 1868), II, 235.

The difficulty with the interpretation of the Davidic covenant as fulfilled partly by temporal events and partly by a spiritualized interpretation is that it does not actually fulfill the covenant. A literal promise spiritualized is exegetical fraud. The point of the Davidic covenant is that the Son of David will possess the throne of His father David. To make His person literal but His throne a spiritualized concept is to nullify the promise.

This point is crystallized in the pronouncement of the angel to Mary quoted above (Luke 1:32-33). It should be perfectly obvious to any Bible student that Mary would understand the promise literally. She actually expected her prophesied Son to reign on an earthly Davidic throne. This expectation seems to have been

shared by many others in the first century. How can anyone formulate a theodicy for the obvious deception that was perpetrated if Mary's idea was utterly wrong and it was never intended to perpetuate the earthly throne of David? The force of the prophecy to Mary is a precise and dramatic confirmation of the promise to David in spite of Israel's centuries of wandering, captivities, and sin. David. Accordingly, in the wisdom of God, the proof that Christ was of the line of David has been preserved, but at the same time the evidence has been destroyed for any future contenders for the honor. The Jews of today must admit that they could not positively identify the lineage of a Messiah if he did appear now. Only Christ has the evidence necessary, and the line is preserved with Him.

The partial fulfillment of the covenant, in that Christ is identified as the one through whom it will be fulfilled, instead of indicating a spiritual fulfillment rather lays the foundation for a literal fulfillment. The purpose of God is seen to be preserved in maintaining the line of David which has the right to rule. The postponement or delay in assuming political power in no wise invalidates the promise. The partial fulfillment in no wise hinders the literal fulfillment of all the covenant.

Is Literal Fulfillment in Harmony with Other Covenants?

The interpretation of the Davidic covenant inevitably is colored by the construction placed on other covenants of Scripture. If the premillennial viewpoint of Scripture be sustained, it is clear that the Davidic covenant fits perfectly into the picture. It is the covenant ground for the earthly rule of Christ. All the promises regarding the nation Israel, the possession of the land, the millennial blessings in general, and the return of Christ to reign are in perfect harmony with a literal fulfillment of the covenant. The purpose of God in David is fulfilled in the reign of Christ. This has two aspects: His millennial reign and the continued rule of God in the new earth for eternity. The premillennial viewpoint provides a fully adequate literal fulfillment of the covenant.

Wilkinson has written a forceful summary of this point: "Nevertheless, facts are stubborn things. It is a fact that God has declared that Israel is not to cease from being a nation before Him for ever. It is a fact that the Jewish nation, still in unbelief, survivor of all others, alone retains its national identity.... It is a fact that the promise of a land (the territorial limits of which were defined) to the posterity of Abraham, as also the promise of a son of David's own line to occupy David's throne for ever, were unconditional promises, ratified by covenant and oath. It is a fact that the posterity of Abraham has never yet fully possessed and enjoyed the whole of the land so granted and that no son of David occupies David's throne.... The O.T. promises are all as certain of fulfillment in their O.T. sense and meaning and purpose to Israel, as are the N.T. promises certain of fulfillment to the Church." [5] Samuel Hinds Wilkinson, *The Israel Promises and Their Fulfilment* (London: John Bale, Sons and Danielsson, Ltd., 1936), pp. 56-57.

The literal fulfillment of the Davidic covenant is in harmony with the larger covenant purpose of God. In fact, its plain intent and the nature of the promises are another confirmation of the premillennial interpretation of Scripture. It provides an interpretation fully honoring to God and His Word.

The New Testament Teaching on the Reign of Christ

Attention has already been called to the New Testament confirmation of the purpose of God to fulfill the Davidic covenant literally (Luke 1:32-33). The New Testament has in all fifty-nine references to David. It also has many references to the present session of Christ. A search of the New Testament reveals that there is not one reference connecting the present session of Christ with the Davidic throne. While this argument is, of course, not conclusive, it is almost incredible that in so many references to David and in so

frequent reference to the present session of Christ on the Father's throne there should be not one reference connecting the two in any authoritative way. The New Testament is totally lacking in positive teaching that the throne of the Father in heaven is to be identified with the Davidic throne. The inference is plain that Christ is seated on the Father's throne, but that this is not at all the same as being seated on the throne of David.

About the only reference which can be construed as having any connection with the identification of David's kingdom reign and the present session of Christ is that found in Acts 15:14-17. After Paul's testimony of wonders wrought among the Gentiles, James addressed the council in these words: "Symeon hath rehearsed how first God visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After these things I will return, and I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called" (Acts 15:14-17, A.S.V.).

The problem of this passage resolves into these questions: (1) What is meant by the "tabernacle of David"? (2) When is the "tabernacle of David" to be rebuilt? The first question is settled by an examination of its source, Amos 9:11, and its context. The preceding chapters and the first part of chapter nine deal with God's judgment upon Israel. It is summed up in the two verses which immediately precede the quotation: "For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all the nations, like as grain is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least kernel fall upon the earth. All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, The evil shall not overtake nor meet us" (Amos 9:9-10).

Immediately following this passage of judgment is the promise of blessing after the judgment, of which the verse quoted in Acts fifteen is the first: "In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up its ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations that are called by my name, saith Jehovah that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring back the captivity of my people Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their own land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given, them, saith Jehovah thy God" (Amos 9:11-15).

The context of the passage deals, then, with Israel's judgment. After this period, which is the period of Gentile opportunity, God will raise up the tabernacle of David, give Israel supremacy over Edom and the nations, bless their crops, regather Israel, restore their cities, and assure them that they will never again be dispersed. The entire passage confirms that the "tabernacle of David" is an expression referring to the whole nation of Israel, and that in contrast to the Gentile nations. By no possible stretch of the plain meaning of this passage can the "tabernacle of David" be made to be an equivalent of the New Testament church. The prophecy concerns the rebuilding of that which was fallen down. The "ruins" are to be rebuilt "as in the days of old." The nature of the blessings are earthly, territorial, and national, and have nothing to do with a spiritual church to which none of these blessings has been promised.

What then is the meaning of the quotation of James? What relation does it have to the problem faced by the council at Jerusalem? The question considered by the council was one of Gentile participation in the church. It apparently was difficult for the apostles to adjust themselves to equality with Gentiles in the

gospel. The evident blessing of God upon the Gentiles, their salvation, and spiritual gifts were indisputable evidence that a change in approach to the Gentiles was necessary. They must face the fact that both Jew and Gentile were saved by grace in exactly the same manner. How was this to be reconciled with the promises of God to Israel? It is this which James answers.

He states, in effect, that it was God's purpose to bless the Gentiles as well as Israel, but in their order. God was to visit the Gentiles first, "to take out of them a people for his name." James goes on to say that this is entirely in keeping with the prophets, for they had stated that the period of Jewish blessing and triumph should be after the Gentile period: "After these things I will return, and I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen." Instead of identifying the period of Gentile conversion with the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David, it is carefully distinguished by the first (referring to Gentile blessing), and after this (referring to Israel's coming glory). The passage, instead of identifying God's purpose for the church and for the nation Israel, established a specific time order. Israel's blessing will not come until "I return," apparently reference to the second coming of Christ. That it could not refer either to the incarnation or to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is evident in that neither is a "return." The passage under consideration constitutes, then, an important guide in determining the purpose of God. God will first conclude His work for the Gentiles in the period of Israel's dispersion; then He will return to bring in the promised blessings for Israel. It is needless to say that this confirms the interpretation that Christ is not now on the throne of David bringing blessing to Israel as the prophets predicted, but He is rather on His Father's throne waiting for the coming earthly kingdom and interceding for His own who form the church.

It is highly significant that as late as Acts 15 the disciples still needed instruction on the distinctions between the kingdom promises and the church. They had been encouraged throughout the earthly ministry of Christ to expect a literal fulfillment of the kingdom promises. As discussed in the previous treatment of the restoration of Israel,[6] Bibliotheca Sacra, "The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism," October-December, 1952, p. 297. the promise given to Mary and Luke was embraced by the disciples as well. They expected the promise of the Davidic kingdom to be fulfilled immediately. They had been promised thrones from which they would judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). The aspiring mother of James and John while rebuked in her hope that her sons would sit on either side of Christ in His kingdom was told that the place was for others--a confirmation of the fundamental kingdom hope. The disciples were promised a place at the King's table in the kingdom as a reward for their sufferings in this life (Luke 22:30). As late as Acts 1:6, the disciples were still looking for a literal kingdom. While refused revelation concerning the "time" of the kingdom, their hope is not denied, spiritualized, or transferred to the church. The kingdom hope is postponed and the new age of which they never dreamed was interposed, but the promises continued undimmed. Israel's day of glory is yet to come and the Christ will reign on earth.

Dallas, Texas

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"Some of the Old Testament prophets spoke before the exile, some during the exile, while others spoke after a remnant (but not the nation) had returned to their land. While they spoke with individual purpose and style, they were united as one voice on certain great themes. They condemned the nation's sin and predicted the coming chastisement. They saw the judgments about to fall upon the surrounding nations--but these Gentile judgments are in view only as they are related to Israel. Above all they saw their own future blessings, the form and manner of which are too accurately described by them to be

misunderstood. Their prophecies expanded into magnificent detail the covenanted reign of David's Son over the house of Jacob forever. In tracing these passages scarcely a comment is necessary, if the statements are taken in their plain and obvious meaning."*

*Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (copyright, 1915, pp. 26-27).

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