

Old Testament lesson – Genesis 12:1-4

New Testament lesson – John 3:1-17

Expiration Date Unknown

When I was growing up, I never saw my mother use milk straight out of the bottle or carton except for cooking. She never drank milk, and I do not recall seeing her eat cold cereal. Maybe she did after she saw me out the door for the school bus, but I never witnessed it.

However, in her later years, probably sometime after Dad died, she started eating cold cereal with milk. But something went wrong with her taste buds at some point. She could not tell when milk was spoiled. Come to think of it, her sense of smell could not have been working, either.

We would go to visit, and I would open the milk jug and almost be knocked over by the smell.

“Mom! How long have you had this milk? It’s bad!”

“No, it’s not. I just had some on my cereal this morning.”

“Well, that wasn’t milk. You put cottage cheese on your cereal.”

You can ask my wife; that is almost verbatim a conversation I had with my mother several years before she died. She could not taste or smell spoiled milk. Expiration dates were made for people like her.

Lots of things have expiration dates: food, drinks, medicines. It usually says something like “best if used by...” or “discard after...” Sometimes it’s just a date, and you’re supposed to know what it means.

Lots of people ignore some expiration dates. By trial and error, you can find out which ones you really should pay attention to. Milk is usually one of those. Twinkies, on the other hand, might have an expiration date, but I don’t think it means anything. I have heard it said that the only two things that would survive a nuclear holocaust will be cockroaches and Twinkies. I wonder how many preppers are stocked up on Twinkies.

Out OT lesson contains something which many people think had an expiration date, but I’m not so sure. It is the promise God made to Abram. In the fashion of ancient times it would have been understood to be a promise that would also apply to the house and descendants of Abram. This promise says that Abram will be a blessing to all the people of the earth. Of course, we Christians believe that promise was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, who brought salvation, a great blessing, to all the world, not just to the Jews.

That, of course, is the subject of our NT lesson. It contains perhaps the most memorized verse of the entire Bible, and certainly the one which appears on the most signs at football games. “For God so loved the world” you know the thing, to quote a recent president.

But in all seriousness, it really is one of the most succinct summaries of the gospel. God loves us. He sent his Son Jesus. If we believe in him, we have eternal life.

How that happens is explained in verses 14 and 15. Jesus was lifted up on the cross, and when you look at that and believe in Jesus, you are healed of death due to sin, just as the bronze serpent provided healing for those who looked upon it if they were bitten by the poisonous snakes that God sent among them one time when they complained about how things were going.

There is disagreement among Bible translators about whether verses 16 and 17 were spoken by Jesus or only written by John as theological explanation. He says a number of things like this throughout the gospel, so I think I’m inclined to agree with the RSV translators in saying that the words of Jesus stop at verses 14 and 15.

That makes these two verses the concluding remarks in his conversation with Nicodemus, which is one of the most interesting encounters in the gospels. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a ruler of Israel, a learned man, a scholar. This position among the rulers forces him to approach Jesus at night, lest someone find out what he is doing.

He admits that he and apparently other Pharisees realize that Jesus is sent from God. His works support that belief. Then out of the blue, Jesus responds with a remark that seems very cryptic to Nicodemus: “You must be born anew (or born again) to see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus had no idea what Jesus meant. If we had been in his place, I doubt any of us would have understood any better. His response was quite sensible. “What do you mean? Can an old man enter his mother’s womb again and be born another time?”

A modern person or someone from farther East might have thought Jesus was referring to reincarnation; not so. Jesus indicated the first birth was natural: born of water. But the second birth, the new birth, was a birth of the spirit.

Jesus elaborates on this spiritual birth for Nicodemus, but he still does not understand. Again that should not surprise us. The means for the second birth had not yet occurred. That’s where verses 14 and 15 come in. After Jesus vaguely identifies himself as the Son of Man, he says that he must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. By this means, a person could have eternal life.

If you remember the mini-series “Jesus of Nazareth” from 1977, Franco Zeffirelli did a beautiful job of connecting this encounter to the crucifixion. Nicodemus watches from a distance as Jesus is dying on the cross, and he whispers, “Born again...now I understand.” Once he saw Jesus lifted up on the cross he understood what he had meant during that earlier secret conversation.

At the point of his death, Jesus established the new covenant in his blood as we point out nearly every time we celebrate communion. And so the question arises: was that the expiration date of the old covenant with Abraham? Some would say yes, but I’m not so sure.

We also need to look more carefully, perhaps, at the covenant God made with Abram. Chapter 12, our OT lesson, was only a promise to Abram. The covenant occurred in chapter 15 verses 18-

*21: On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites."*

So if we look at the covenant God made with Abram, it was a covenant to give that land to Abram and his descendants. He renews the covenant with Isaac and Jacob. As far as I can tell, this covenant has no expiration date. It seems to me that it is separate from the promise to Abram to make him a blessing. However, it was apparently necessary to have a land for the people who would bring the blessing of Abram into the world.

Now, some would argue that once the blessing of the world was completed in the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, the old covenant was no longer in force. I’m not so sure about that. I find no expiration date or condition for the covenant. There is nothing to indicate that at some point the land described would no longer be God’s gracious gift to the Jewish people. I think history and current events support my opinions on this.

Through thousands of years of history, Israel and the Jewish people have been the targets of wars, conquests, persecutions, and pogroms. The climax of it all was seen in Nazi Germany when 6,000,000 Jews were simply murdered along with about 5,000,000 persons of other groups the Nazis did not like. I sometimes wonder if this other collection of victims was a smokescreen to obscure the motivation behind the slaughter of so many of Abraham’s descendants. Those other deaths made it seem like a political or ethnic agenda, instead of a spiritual agenda.

As I have stated before, I am certain that this is a spiritual agenda, directed by no human entity, neither individual nor group. It is nothing less than satanic. And it is on the increase in our time.

According to information from the Anti-Defamation League, hate crimes against Jews in

the U. S. are increasing. The latest figures available are for 2024. That year, there were more than 9,000 antisemitic incidents in America, which most of us certainly like to think of as the land of the free, a land where everyone is created equal and we all have the same rights. But those 9,354 antisemitic incidents represent an increase of almost 900% over the past ten years.

I know of one other country that experienced an increase like that in ten years: Nazi Germany, from 1933 to 1943. If you want to make comparisons to Hitler and the Nazis here in America, don't look to the White House. Look at the people doing this sort of thing. How can it be that Jews make up 2.4% of our population, yet they are the targets of nearly 70% of the hate crimes? There is something at work here that should be of concern for every Christian.

It has been many years since I spent much of my time looking into Bible prophecies about the "end times" and that sort of thing. I simply don't consider it as profitable as other areas of study. Maybe I'm afraid that if I did study that I would become just as wacky as some of the people who do focus a lot of their attention on that. And frankly, I have enough to deal with in the present time.

But I can not help wondering what is going on when I see the increase in antisemitism not only in America but in many parts of the world. I have trouble attributing all of it to the migration of Muslims to various places.

Jews comprise about 0.2% of the world's population. For such a small number, they sure do seem to be the target of disproportionate hatred. Granted, they probably have more influence than one might expect from such a small group. But it is partly the result of the persecution they have experienced. Persecution forced them to become very tight-knit and to focus on education and developing skills and forms of wealth that could be easily transferred from one place to another when they were forced to move.

Are they all good and wonderful people? No. Are they all evil and despicable? Also no. If they commit crimes, they should be prosecuted. If they are here in the U.S. illegally, they should be deported. If they exert evil influence, they should be stopped; the name "Soros" comes to my mind. In short, under the law, Jews should be treated like anyone else, because they are the same as us with the same rights.

But there is that promise, and that covenant. And since there is no expiration date on God's relationship, we can only conclude they are somehow still in effect. That is why there is still persecution against the Jews. So many conspiracy theories about the Jews just make no sense, unless a person is willing to listen to a demonic voice whispering in their ear that it's all true and these people are evil and they need to be killed. That last one is the final lie. Once someone believes that, they may be beyond help.

Or perhaps not. After all, the reality is right there in front of us: God sent his Son so that whoever believes in him would have eternal life. God kept his promise to Abram, and that is why you and I are grafted into God's covenant people, as Paul points out in Romans. The possibility always exists that one can be born again, born of the spirit. There is no expiration date on that offer.

When we are born in the normal way, born of water as Jesus put it, we have an expiration date. It's not stamped on us anywhere, and there is no way to know what it is. We do know that regardless of that date, every day brings us closer to it. But the offer of eternal life removes the threat of death completely. Through the spiritual new birth in Jesus Christ we have eternal life. That lasts forever, of course, even longer than Twinkies.

If, by some chance, you have never taken advantage of this offer of the new birth, seize on it today. As we celebrate communion we proclaim the death of our Lord Jesus Christ until he comes again. In your own mind look at him on the cross, look to him for healing, and receive

the eternal life he offers. Make your expiration date irrelevant by receiving eternal life. If you have already experienced the spiritual birth Jesus spoke of, rejoice and celebrate at his table with thanksgiving. Pray for others who have not yet

experienced that new birth, and pray for those who are persecuted because they have a covenant with the Living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whether it is the older covenant or the new one. Amen.