

The Promise and the Kingdom

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Given 26-Sep-02; Tape #FT02-10

Winston Churchill once remarked, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." With that comment in mind today I want to spend a few minutes looking backward to see God's Kingdom. Paradoxically, we are going to look backward to see forward.

We will look all the way back to the patriarch Abraham—that is something like 4,000 years ago. It is a long journey back in time, so let us take a rest stop. We will stop in the days of Isaiah. There in Isaiah 51, God issues what might appear at first to be a very strange command. I am going to read from the New American Standard Bible. God says:

Isaiah 51:1 (NASB) Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
[Brethren, hopefully it is we who pursue righteousness. This is written
to God's people.] Who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you
were hewn, And to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to
Abraham your father . . .

What is it about Abraham that would make God instruct us to look back to him—back to a person whose times and whose culture were so very different from those of our own? What could we possibly learn by looking back to Abraham? I think the answer there lies in the absolute fact, as it says there in Isaiah 51, that Abraham is our father. That is a fact; and we will see it is not just a metaphor.

We will not turn to Romans 4:16, but it provides a New Testament witness to that fact. There Paul says that Abraham "is the father of us all." In Galatians 3:29 (And do not turn there yet; we are going to be coming back and spending some time in Galatians, but we will not take the time to turn there right now.), Paul mentions that we who are Christ's are "Abraham's seed." This father-son relationship between Abraham and God's people is not just metaphorical.

In fact, so real is this relationship that Paul continues in verse 29 declaring that God's people inherit after their father Abraham; we are "heirs according to the promise." That is exactly what sons do from their fathers—they inherit. This is a very real father-son relationship.

But, what promise are we speaking of here? Promise by whom? Promise to whom? In Romans 9 (And I will ask you to turn there if you want), Paul provides a very straightforward answer to those questions about "the promise." Here Paul epitomizes—perhaps we should use the word summarizes—the promise into a few words.

Romans 9:9 For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come
and Sarah shall have a son."

Paul is quoting Genesis 21: 12, where God promises Abraham of Isaac's birth. So, the promise was made by God. The promise was made to Abraham. And, it had to do with Isaac. Now, I think you will all agree that to Abraham this was a very important promise. He did not have any children through Sarah yet, and he needed one.

But, aside from the fact that many of us are physical Israelites and therefore have descended through Isaac, what does this promise mean to us personally? Does it have any spiritual meaning to us? The apostle Peter, speaking in Acts 2, makes the answer to that question very, very clear in the very first sermon that was preached to the New Testament Church. In Acts 2: 39, Peter says:

Acts 2: 39 For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.

God did not make the promise to Abraham alone. He made it to those living after him. The promise is to us, and it says "to all who are afar off"— it is to the Gentiles as well. The promise is to "as many as the Eternal our God will call." That is a key term, is it not? The promise is connected with our calling. The promise is spiritual. And now all of a sudden the promise becomes personal.

All these points dove-tail in Hebrews 9; I am not going to ask you to turn there for lack of time, but you might want to take a look at this very interesting scripture sometime—Hebrews 9: 15—because all of these little points dove-tail in a neat little bundle there. The writer of the book of Hebrews asserts that Christ works in order that "those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." There is: *calling; inheritance; promise* —all rolled up together. Yes, the promise is very important to us. Not just to Abraham, but to us as his children; we inherit from him.

It behooves, then, to understand exactly what the promise is. And if you want a Specific Purpose Statement, you will understand what I am saying is that the promise points to, or it preaches the gospel of God's salvation, and it preached it to Abraham. Therefore, we will see just why it is so important that God tells us to look backward for a 1,000 years to the days of Abraham. Look back to him, as the Instructor says.

Let us go back now to the book of Genesis and take a look at those promises. We will read just a few of them and see what is so important about those things that God promised to our father, to Abraham. We will begin in Genesis 12 which significantly records the call of Abram. I am going to read the first three verses.

Genesis 12:1-3: Now the Eternal had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your kindred And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This promise is general. It is not detailed at all. But it is hardly insubstantial. God makes it clear to Abraham that He—God—is going to be the source of all blessings for Abraham. God's is the task to show Abraham a new land. God will lead Abraham. God will morph Abraham into a "great nation;" God will make his "name great." Notice also that God says He will extend the blessings far beyond Abraham himself, or even beyond his immediate family or his clan or a nation coming from him. God says that "all the families of the earth" will be blessed in him. This is far more than a personal promise. This is a promise global in scope.

The second promise appears just a chapter over in Genesis 13. I am going to begin reading in verse 14:

Genesis 13:14-16 And the Eternal said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward: for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered.

This promise is a bit more specific: First, God promises that He will multiply Abraham, that He will give him a lot of descendants. Secondly, God explicitly connects His promise with land.

Both the promise of land and what I call fecundity—that is, population—are natural outgrowths of the Genesis 12 promise that we looked at just a moment ago. In that promise, you will recall, God assures Abraham he will become "a great nation."

Now, we all know that great nations have lots of land, and that great nations have lots of people. So, in fact, this second promise is really just an embellishment, a restatement of the first one that we saw in Genesis 12. But, there is something much more beyond this, a point that we need to make, a dimension I need to mention in the Genesis 13 promise that we dare not miss. God says He will give this land to Abraham and to his descendants forever. We will come back to that idea in just a minute..

The next promise occurs in Genesis 15—just a page over. Abraham is concerned about all these descendants that he is going to have (if you were to read the scripture) because he yet has *not* had any children at all through Sarah. How is he going to produce descendants all over the place if he has not had one son at the present time? In verse 4 God assures him that indeed he will have a child, an heir, and in verse 5, that his descendants will be more numerable than the stars.

In verses 18 through 21, God makes a covenant with Abraham, more specifically describing this land Abraham's descendants will inherit—"from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates" (verse 18). This is the first promise that God makes to Abraham involving a covenant. We will talk about that in just a minute too.

In Genesis 17 appears the next promise—and I really should say, the next recitation of the same promise, because as I said before all of these promises dove-tail. All of these promises

kind of have common threads and we will isolate those common threads as we go through. This chapter, Genesis 17, also records a covenant—this time it is the covenant of circumcision. Abraham is now 99 years old and still without an heir through Sarah. We will start with verse 2 of Genesis 17.

Genesis 17:2, 4-8 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. [Skipping to verse 4] As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

There are a number of points which stand out here. "I will be their God." In all these promises that we have looked at, but especially here, God is not just interested in Abraham, but is interested in Abraham's descendants; it comes through in this passage just as clear as a bell. This promise is not just to Abraham, but to those after him.

Secondly, note that this is the second promise that involves a covenant. We looked at the first one there briefly in Genesis 15. As many of you know, the transference of land through a deed often involves covenants—in fact, even to this very day, these covenants exist. They are, as it were, attached to the deed. God is handing over a sizable chunk of real estate to Abraham and in a few minutes we will see exactly how much land that really is. He is doing so through a group of covenants. There a lot of covenants involved in this transference of land.

Third, is the promise of Genesis 17; God reiterates His promise to multiply Abraham's descendants. Fourth, God restates the promise of "an everlasting possession" of land.

Finally, as a fifth point (and this is not insignificant at all) God adds that Abraham will be the father of nations—note the plural—and also that he will be the ancestor of kings—again, plural.

Now, let us take a look at one more statement of the promise, this time we will skip over to Genesis 22. (We were here on Monday. Mike Ford spent a lot of time here. John retouched upon it.) This incident takes place just after God aborted the sacrifice of Isaac.

Genesis 22:15-18 And the Angel of the Eternal called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, says the Eternal, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate

of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

God here promises that the influence of Abraham will stretch far beyond their immediate geographic bounds, but will extend all the way to their enemies' gates.

Let us see what we can do with all of these promises. I suggest to you that if we put all these promises together (the ones in Genesis 12, 13, 15, 17 and 22), we come up with a composite promise that has some common threads. Let us identify some of those common threads that appear in this promise. First, there is the eternal possession of land. That is obvious.

Secondly, a thread which to me is even more important is fecundity, or population. God promises Abraham, who had no son at all through Sarah during the time of the earlier promises, that he will be the ancestor of many peoples. No wonder Paul encapsulated it by stating that it was "the word of promise" as we saw in Romans 9: 9: The "word of promise" was Isaac's birth to Sarah: "At this time I will come and Sarah will have a son."

Massive population appears to be (to me) the most conspicuous and the most ubiquitous thread of the promises. People! Lots and lots of people! They will need land, so God is going to give them land. He gives them land in perpetuity. But, land without people has about the same potential as the lunar landscape if you think about it. It does not do much good. People are what is going to be needed.

Finally, as an extension of this thread of fecundity appears a third thread: the ultimate nationhood of Abraham's descendants. Not just a group of descendants, loosely connected, but they are going to be united in a nation.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with understanding and applying these promises of land and population physically, and by that I mean nationally. Mr. Armstrong did that. We have all done that in the past and it is correct. I do not want to be misunderstood. We all understand, for instance, the promises of land refer to God's restoration of the land of Canaan during the Millennium.

As another example, we all understand that from Abraham have come numbers of kings, historically, and numbers of great nations, foremost of them being modern-day Ephraim and Manasseh. Again, we understand that modern-day Israelite nations possess (or have possessed) their enemies' geographic gates.

But, does God command us to look all the way back 4,000 years to Abraham because of the national applications of these promises? Are these national applications the thrust of God's promises to Abraham? Is that all there is? If I can quote Paul (I think he said it twice, maybe three times in the book of Romans), "God forbid!" There is much more to them.

Now we will turn to Galatians 3. Paul here makes a very important statement. In context, Paul is arguing that salvation is of faith and not of works.

Galatians 3:8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying,

"In you all the nations shall be blessed."

Paul is saying that Abraham knew the gospel—had received from God the same gospel which Paul called, in Romans 1:16, "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." Abraham believed and it was accounted to him for righteousness. God's promises in Genesis proclaim the good news of God's salvation through faith. That is basically my SPS. I stated it earlier and now I will say it one more time so you can get it in your notes: God's promises to Abraham proclaim the gospel of God's salvation through faith. No wonder Abraham is so important.

Let us take a look to see if I can back that statement up with a few specifics. We will look at five points. First, the promise of the eternal possession of land is really a promise of God's Kingdom. That promise is, as we saw in Genesis 13, to include all compass points—northward, southward, eastward, and westward. Further, the land is given over in perpetuity. It is given over forever. It will be secure, never to be snatched away by an enemy in, for instance, an act of war.

The four-compass-points promise is in fact a promise of the universe. That is how big the chunk of land that Abraham is going to receive.

We will not turn to Romans 4:13, but Paul speaks there of "the promise that He [Christ] would be heir of the world." In Revelation 21:7, Christ Himself states that "[H]e who overcomes shall inherit all things." I think the Greek means "the all, the everything" It is the universe.

Let us not forget, as well, in other scriptures (although we will focus mostly here on Genesis 13:15), that the promises involved land that will fall to Abraham as well as to his descendants. Not just to his descendants, but to Abraham himself. So this cannot just mean that Abraham's descendants, throughout their various generations over time, are going to receive the land and keep it. It does mean that. But God says that Abraham himself will inherit the land.

And yet in Acts 7:5, Stephen makes it clear that Abraham did not ever receive the land in his lifetime. No, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, God promised to give it to him for a possession and to his descendants afterward.

Abraham died without inheriting the land. To inherit it—to fulfill God's promise to him—Abraham is going to have to be resurrected. And, if he is going to receive it forever, he will have to be resurrected as a spirit being; one over whom death has no more sway. So, the promise of eternal possession of land to Abraham is in fact a promise of eternal life as a spirit being—one who cannot die.

To what else could the promise of eternal ownership of land refer? Could it refer, for instance, to Israel under King David? Could it refer to Solomon's vast domain? Or could it refer to Israel's possession of the land in the Millennium? No way! These are all types (and they are types, they are typical fulfillments) because all of these historic (or prophetic) periods of time are going to have an end. David's kingdom ended; Solomon's kingdom ended. And, the Millennium, as wonderful as it will be, is going to end. There are some people who actually teach and believe that the thousand year period in the book of Revelation is a symbol for eternity. They do not read the book of Revelation very well do they? Revelation 20:7 clearly speaks of the time "when

the thousand years [will] have expired..." The thousand years is going to end. It is not eternal. But, God's Kingdom will not end *that* is the land we will inherit through our Father Abraham forever.

God's promise to Abraham that he and his descendants will eternally possess land is a promise of the Kingdom of God where land becomes emblematic of "all things"—the entire universe.

Secondly now (and I have five points here), let us turn our attention to God's promise that He will make of Abraham "a great nation." We saw this in Genesis 12: 2. I think it was mentioned in a few of those other promises as well. God said that He would make of Abraham a great nation.

How did this promise preach to Abraham the gospel of God's kingdom? In answer to that question, let us start with a well-known scripture, I Peter 2: 9. Peter is here quoting Deuteronomy, and he is speaking to the Church. I want you to notice that. He is not speaking nationally. He is not speaking to physical Israelites in that sense, but he is speaking to the church, to God's people.

I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...

God's children make up a nation. Now, please turn to Daniel 2. I want to spend a few minutes on Daniel 2 because I think sometimes we misunderstand Daniel 2 a little bit. This points to a kingdom, or nation, which is eternal. Daniel, in interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream, refers to the stone which strikes the image at its feet, destroying it. Of the image's successor nation, the nation which grows up after it, Daniel has this to say in verse 44:

Daniel 2:44 And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom [a nation] which shall never be destroyed, and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.

The event to which Daniel refers takes place at the start of the Millennium, when Christ takes over the governments of the "present evil world." But this nation-building by God continues from that point. It just does not stop there. It is an ongoing matter. Daniel's comments do not speak of a physical nation that is established at the start of the Millennium with its head in Jerusalem because that physical nation established it.

The Millennium itself is a time which is going to end. Daniel's nation is going to last forever. It will last beyond the Millennium, and it will last past the White Throne Period. Daniel speaks of a spiritual nation, a nation outside history. It is beyond history. It is a great nation that is so special, so very different from other nations, because it will not decay or fall into oblivion with the ebb and flow of history like every other nation has done.

We saw that God's promises of land to Abraham had imbedded in it the idea of eternity—inheriting forever. Likewise, God's promise to him regarding great-nationhood also has imbedded within it the idea of eternity.

Now, of course, this does not deny that God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation has typical fulfillments, or national fulfillment. It certainly does. In the kingdom of David, that of Solomon, and even in the ascendancy of Ephraim and Manasseh as hegemonies in this day and age, these are all typical fulfillments of those promises.

But, these are only types. The final great nation to come from Abraham will devolve on his heirs, those "in Christ," as Galatians 3: 29 puts it. The great nation of which God speaks to Abraham is the nation without end—the Kingdom of God.

As a third point, we will focus on that predominate thread we saw in so many of God's promises to Abraham—lots of descendants (population). Did this promise preach the gospel of the Kingdom to Abraham? If so, how?

Again, there have been typical fulfillments of this promise. We certainly cannot deny that fact. I will not ask you to turn to I Kings 4: 20, but I will just read it very quickly. There it tells us that, in the days of Solomon, "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea..." It uses that same metaphor, that same type of terminology we found in the Genesis promises, that Israel will be populous today. And, Israel will be populous in the Millennium, a time when God "will multiply them... and they shall not diminish" I will refer you to Jeremiah 30: 19. There God says, "I will multiply Israel and they shall not diminish." There are certainly national fulfillments (in type) of this promise.

But this promise of God to Abraham has its final fulfillment in the context of the Kingdom. I am going to string together a bunch of scriptures. I will not ask you to turn to them. I will just go through them rather quickly for lack of time. You know them very well. In II Peter 3: 9, the Apostle Peter tells us that,

II Peter 3:9 God is not slack concerning His promise, as many count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

All. *That* is a lot of people. As well, I would refer you to I Timothy 2: 4. The Apostle Paul tells us of God's commitment to save as many as possible.

I Timothy 2:4 [God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

We understand that some fall into the lake of fire. But I think we all believe that God will work mightily to save the bulk—or a major part—of mankind. Jack spoke of this a few days ago (99% +). I do not know. But he is the engineer so he must.

Does Paul not tell us that "All Israel shall be saved?" (Romans 11: 26). The Prophet Isaiah, as recorded in Isaiah 2, makes it clear that "all nations shall flow" to the nation of God. And as another example you might want to take a look sometime at Isaiah 9: 7. Here Isaiah writes, "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end." The Prophet does not simply assert here that the government of God will not end (of course that is true) but what he says is

that it will never cease to grow. It will forever increase. It will forever get bigger. How many sons will Abraham have 50 billion of years from now? The very thought challenges the fringes of our imaginations.

As a fourth point, let us consider God's promise in the book of Genesis that "Kings shall come from [Abraham]" (Genesis 17: 6). This promise, as well, preached the gospel of God's Kingdom to Abraham. Certainly, in type, God has fulfilled this promise literally hundreds of times, and I guess we could say thousands of times, in a national/physical sense. David's dynasty—ruling to this very day—descended ultimately from Abraham. If the traditional genealogies of Perez and Zerah are accurate, then most of the kings of Europe—Spain, Russia, Italy, France, and others—descended through Judah from Abraham.

But as impressive as the record of history is in this particular regard, the real kings of God's promise to Abraham do not appear in dusty genealogical tables. Rather, they are future kings—those spoken of in Revelation 5: 10—those "kings and priests" who "shall reign on the earth," as rulers of five cities, ten cities, as Luke 19 mentions. Christ tells us in Matthew 19 that His disciples, who will "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel," are among these kings. Jeremiah 30: 9 (we will not turn there) tells that God will "raise up" David to reign again as a king.

It will be the faithful—the sons of Abraham—who will rule with God as kings. The faithful in Christ, as we saw in Galatians 3: 29, are Abraham's true seed. God's promise that Abraham will be the father of kings is a spiritual promise referring to Abraham's spiritual children—future kings and priests.

The fifth point (and it is the final point), let us consider God's promise that "[I]n [Abraham's] seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." We saw that in Genesis 22: 18. This promise as well preaches the gospel to Abraham.

I promised you that we would go to Galatians 3. We have been here before actually and we will go here again as we begin to wind down. Paul describes in this passage the descendants of Abraham in spiritual terms, in terms of faith. I will read from the Philips translation. Philips does a very good job here.

Galatians 3:6 (Philips) You can go right back to Abraham . . .

And at God's command, that is exactly what we have been doing today. We have been going back to Abraham. You can go right back to Abraham to see the principles of faith in God. He, we are told, "believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness." Can you not see, then, that all those who believe God are the real sons of Abraham? The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the gentiles by faith, really proclaimed the gospel centuries ago in the words spoken to Abraham, "In [you] shall all nations be blessed." All men of faith share the blessing of Abraham who believed God.

I need to make a statement about that last sentence. What we understand that to mean is all men of *the* faith"—not just any faith—will share in the inheritance of God's Kingdom. Let us now drop down to verse 16. Paul here is absolutely explicit. He could not be any more explicit. The promise to Abraham is not national in its final fulfillment, but it is spiritual. Verse 16, I will read

it again from Philips: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and his seed."

Notice in passing that the scripture says not "seeds" but uses the singular "seed," meaning Christ.

Paul is not ambiguous: The blessing of the nations is spiritual, as people join the God family. Those blessings will come through Christ. We will skip down to verse 26, again from Philips. Keep in mind that Paul in context is comparing the power of the Law to that of Faith.

Galatians 3:26 (Philips) For now that you have faith in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God. All of you who were baptized into Christ have put on the family likeness of Christ. Gone is the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female—you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, you are true descendants of Abraham, you are true heirs of his promise.

God indeed had very good reason to command us to "look to Abraham [our] father." For, when God made the promises to Abraham, He preached to Abraham a thumbnail version of the gospel which Abraham believed.

Faith is paramount, is it not? Abraham had it. We are his spiritual children when we display his same faith in God's promises. And, walking in that faith as Abraham walked in it, we will inherit the blessings that God promised our father Abraham. That is why we need to remember Abraham. That is why we need to look back at him. We remember his faith. Notice Romans 4: 20, where Paul is writing about Abraham.

Romans 4:20-22 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore, it was accounted to him for righteousness.

We need to remember Abraham's faith, yes, but we also need to remember his works. We call Hebrews 11 the faith chapter, and it certainly is. But James tells us in James 2: 26 that "faith without works is dead." So Hebrews 11 is in one very real sense, I believe, a works chapter. I sometimes like to call it the works chapter and here it describes, for instance, the wonderful works of the men of faith. And here is the wonderful works of Abraham—works that he did in faith.

I am going to conclude in Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed [There is the works. He did it in faith, but he obeyed.] when he was called to go out to the place which he would afterward receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob,

the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. [What he was waiting for was the Kingdom.] By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Do not these references to Sarah, to stars, to sky, to sand, and to seashore tell us of what promises the writer of the book of Hebrews is speaking? Can there be any doubt that Hebrews is speaking here of the same promises, the promises God made to Abraham that we looked at in Genesis? In all the uncertainties and all of the questions, and all of the problems, in all of those things that attend dwelling in a foreign land among hostile people, Abraham consistently—not perfectly—but consistently obeyed God for decades.

We will skip to verse 39, after the catalog of the faithful:

Hebrews 11:39 And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

That is the promise: perfection, be made perfect; sanctification; abundant life as God leads it. As we obediently walk in the same faith in which Abraham walked, God works out His promise to Abraham in us.