

## **WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL & THE JEWISH PEOPLE? ROMANS 9 & 11; GALATIANS 3**

How can you and I get ready for the end of the world? I like this observation from C.S. Lewis, “The greatest thing is to be found at one’s post as a child of God, living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.” For several weeks now, we’ve been considering what the Bible says about the future. This series of messages is entitled “In The Last Days: What Does the Bible Say About the End Times?” We’ve learned this is a really large, controversial subject. People who love Jesus equally and have an equally high view of Scripture don’t always agree on how to interpret the Bible on this subject. Today, I want to address the role of Israel and the Jewish people in future events. Again, this is like trying to cover world history in 30 minutes! There’s no way I can cover every relevant Scripture or address every appropriate question that might be asked. But, again, if it gets you to dig into your Bible more, I say, “Mission accomplished!”

As we begin, it’s very important that I say something strategic about how to interpret the Bible. As you know, the Bible is made up of two testaments – the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jewish people believe only the Old Testament is God’s Word, while Christians believe both the Old and New Testaments are God’s Word. We believe they’re equally inspired by the Holy Spirit. In addition, Christians believe you can’t really understand the New Testament much at all without a working knowledge of the Old Testament. Having said that, Christians have always believed that the Old Testament is best interpreted by the New Testament. God’s revelation to us is more full and complete in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. Therefore, when the New Testament deals with any subject that touches on an Old Testament text or theme, it’s interpretation “trumps” any and all other interpretations. Imagine the New Testament as a pair of contact lens or glasses. Whenever you read the Old Testament, you should put on your New Testament lens or glasses. Whenever possible, interpret the Old Testament by the New Testament. That’s a very important point as we ask and then try to answer two important questions concerning Israel and the Jewish people and their role in any future events having to do with biblical prophecy and the end times. Here’s the first question we want to consider...

### **ARE THEY GOD’S CHOSEN PEOPLE?**

I wish I had a nickel for every time over the years that I’ve heard a Christian say, “The Bible says that the Jews are God’s chosen people.” I’d be a rich man! Many Christians believe and teach that ethnic Jews and the modern state of Israel have a God-given destiny based on God’s covenant with Abraham and certain Old Testament prophecies. If you’ve grown up in an evangelical church in North America, you might be surprised to learn that not all Christians hold that view. It points out once again the success that John Nelson Darby, the father of dispensational theology, has enjoyed. Darby was an Irish attorney in the 1800s turned Anglican priest turned leader in another Christian group known as the Plymouth Brethren. His theology was popularized by Charles Scofield who put together a very famous and much loved study Bible that has had a profound influence on conservative Christians in the 1900s. Dispensationalism’s

perspective on Israel, the Jewish people, and the study of the end times has absolutely dominated North American evangelicals for the past 100 years.

One of dispensationalism's core teachings is that God has two distinct chosen peoples: both national, ethnic Israel and the Church. By Church I don't mean any specific, local congregation like ours. Instead, when I refer to the Church today, I'm talking about that spiritual group of people past, present and future who have all put saving faith in Jesus for salvation. Israel and the Church have two distinct plans and two distinct destinies. This is actually the central belief that sets dispensationalism apart from all other viewpoints on the end times. Israel has been given earthly promises and destiny, while the Church has been given a different set of promises that are more heavenly in scope and definition. But both are God's chosen people in very different ways.

Now, I have no reason to believe that Mr. Darby and Mr. Scofield were anything other than sincere followers of Jesus and godly men. I know for a fact that's true of many of their theological followers, because it reads like a Who's Who list of North American Christian leaders. But on this point, I could not disagree with them more! If all we had was the Old Testament, I could understand why they came to that conclusion. But we have the New Testament! Remember, the New Testament should always interpret the Old Testament. And when I read and ponder the New Testament, I find that it actually redefines and enlarges what it means to be God's chosen people.

First of all, God's chosen people in the Old Testament were always a "remnant" within Israel - never the entire nation. Paul, the great Christian leader, who God used to write most of what we know call the New Testament, makes this point very clear. Look at what he wrote to the Christians in Rome. "Well then, has God failed to fulfill his promise to Israel? No, for not all who are born into the nation of Israel are truly members of God's people! Being descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children.... This means that Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children." (Rom 9:6-8 NLT) Paul rejects the idea that God ever intended to save every last person who had Jewish blood flowing through his or her veins. Simply being ethnically Jewish did not make you automatically a child of Abraham spiritually or one of God's chosen people. Not every Jewish person was or is chosen by God.

Now, two chapters later, he says the same thing in a different way. "I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.... So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." (Rom 11:1-6 NIV) In other words, before Jesus arrived on the scene, there was a group of Jewish people that Paul calls "a remnant" who were truly God's chosen people. They were Jewish people who loved God and related to Him on the basis of faith and obedience. This was a subset of people, a smaller group, within the larger group that made up physical, national Israel. Furthermore, God chose these people – this remnant – solely on the basis of His grace and their faith not on the basis of their racial or ethnic identity.

Here's what the New Testament teaches next. Because of what Jesus did, the "remnant" has now been redefined and enlarged to include Jewish and Gentile people who relate to God through faith in and obedience to Jesus. By the way, that word "Gentile" means anyone and everyone who is not ethnically Jewish. The New Testament teaches that being chosen by God has nothing to do with ethnicity, but faith in Jesus. In yet another chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe. That is what the Scriptures mean when God told him, 'I have made you the father of many nations.'" (Rom 4:16-17 NLT) Peter, one of the original twelve disciples and another key leader of the first Christians, came to the same conclusion when God told him to share the good news about Jesus with a Gentile – a non-Jew – named Cornelius. "I see very clearly that God shows no favoritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right. This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel - that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. (Acts 10:34-36 NLT)

Is there any advantage to being Jewish? The New Testament teaches that it's still a great privilege and blessing to be Jewish, but it does not guarantee God's special favor. As far as I know I don't have any Jewish blood in my veins, but if I did, I would feel both proud and blest. No ethnic group on the planet has a greater heritage! Here's how Paul described it, "They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's adopted children. God revealed his glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave them his law. He gave them the privilege of worshiping him and receiving his wonderful promises. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as his human nature is concerned." (Rom 9:4-5 NLT) Well, has God somehow rejected the Jewish people as a whole? Absolutely not! Paul wrote, "I ask, then, has God rejected his own people, the nation of Israel? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. No, God has not rejected his own people, whom he chose from the very beginning." (Rom 11:1-2 NLT) Paul saw himself as proof that God had not rejected the Jewish people as a whole. He saw himself as part of that remnant within national, physical Israel that had now put their faith in Jesus, Israel's Messiah, for salvation.

The grand conclusion of the New Testament on this matter is simply this: true Israel is the Church of Jesus Christ. Christians are God's chosen people not national Israel. You want Bible? Here's Bible from Galatians 3! By the way, remember he's writing this letter to a local church full of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. "In the same way, 'Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.' The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God. What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would declare the Gentiles to be righteous because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith." (Gal 3:6-9 NLT) What makes anyone – Jew or Gentile - a part of God's chosen people? It's faith in Jesus not ethnicity!

In fact, your relationship to Jesus is the absolutely critical factor. Why? Paul continues in that same chapter, “God gave the promises to Abraham and his child. And notice that the Scripture doesn’t say ‘to his children,’ as if it meant many descendants. Rather, it says ‘to his child’—and that, of course, means Christ.” (Gal 3:16 NLT) The only way anyone – Jew or Gentile – gets to be a part of God’s chosen people is to be in Jesus – in other words, trusting in Him and following Him as His disciple. Paul brings his whole argument to a mighty conclusion at the end of the same chapter, “There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God’s promise to Abraham belongs to you.” (Gal 3:28-29 NLT) The question of who is God’s chosen people or not doesn’t hinge on your ethnicity (Jew or Gentile), or on your gender (male or female), or on your social and economic status (slave or free).

It all comes down to your relationship to Jesus. In chapter six of that same letter, Paul writes, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule - to the Israel of God.” (Gal 6:15-16 NIV) Could it be any clearer? In other words, from a biblical and spiritual perspective, real Israel is the Church, and the true Church is Israel. God’s presence and God’s action in this world is not now and never will be again an ethnically united people group (the nation of Israel) who share a common ancestry. No, instead God’s presence and God’ action in this work is through a spiritually united people group (the Church of Jesus Christ) all over the world who share a common faith in Jesus and a common life in the Holy Spirit. Now, it was very important to ask and answer that question before we try to answer a second question this morning regarding the end times. Here it is...

### **DO THEY HAVE A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE FUTURE?**

In other words, does ethnic, national Israel and the Jewish people have a special destiny regarding the end times? If you look at just the Old Testament, the answer is probably yes. But if you look at just the New Testament, the answer is no. And if you look at the Old Testament through New Testament lens, which is the wisest approach of all, I believe the answer is still no. So, where did this whole idea come from of Israel and the Jewish people figuring so large in the end times? Mr. Darby and his dispensational friends. Again, they’re good people who love Jesus and who have a high view of Scripture, but I could not disagree with them more on this issue as well. Again, this may well be the only viewpoint you’ve ever heard, but please don’t buy into the myth that all Christians believe this way or that no other valid interpretations exist.

What does dispensationalism teach in this regard? Again, please remember that dispensationalism believes that God has two chosen peoples: national Israel and the Church. Mr. Darby and his friends believe that the purpose of Jesus’ first coming was to fulfill all of the Old Testament promises to Israel, but Israel as a nation rejected Jesus. As a result, God has postponed, but not cancelled, the fulfillment of these promises and has concentrated His efforts on the Church. That’s the time frame we are living in right

now. But when God's purposes for the Church are completed, Jesus will return in a two phase second coming. The first phase will mean taking all the Christians out of the world and to Heaven. This is often referred to as "the pre-tribulation rapture" which I was taught to believe in with all of my heart as a child. You should know that for 1900 years of church history, not one Christian leader – not St. Augustine, not Martin Luther, not John Calvin, not John Wesley – believed in or taught a pretribulation rapture of all believers. That singular insight was achieved by John Nelson Darby. He went on to teach what most of us have accepted over 100 years later as the one and only biblical perspective on the end times. After the rapture, Antichrist will be revealed and rule the world in a seven year long Great Tribulation. He will kill two-thirds of the Jewish people all over the world alive at the time and commit horrible blasphemies in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Just when everything seems lost, Jesus will return from Heaven in the second phase of His second coming along with all Christians. Antichrist and his allies will be defeated at the Battle of Armageddon.

The 1,000 year long Millennium will begin with Jesus reigning as the King of Israel from the city of Jerusalem. It's in the Millennium, dispensationalists believe, that all of God's promises to Israel will be finally fulfilled. It's not Heaven, but pretty close to it – a time of unparalleled peace and prosperity under Jesus' reign. Israel will dominate the planet. While Gentiles will share in its blessing, it will be a predominately Jewish kingdom, with sacrifices at the temple resumed and the Mosaic and Levitical systems restored. Then at the end of the 1,000 years, Satan will make one final attempt to rebel against God. Jesus will crush Him, a final judgment will be held, and then – finally – the new Heavens and the new Earth are created and everyone enters their eternal state.

If that feels overly complicated, convoluted and cumbersome, come and be an amillennialist with me! Jesus came the first time. He focused on the growth and spread of the Kingdom of God and said not one word about any Millennium. Neither did Paul. He will come again a second time literally and personally at a time when no one expects Him. No necessity for a pretribulation rapture or a seven year Great Tribulation. His return will be the definitive God moment. All dead Christians will be raised to life. All of us will receive resurrected or transformed bodies. All those who rejected Jesus will be judged. And if Jesus begins to reign then literally and personally over the new Heavens and the new Earth, of what use and purpose is a Millennium? Just a thought....

Now, you should know that certain events of 1948 and 1967 are considered by our dispensational friends to be a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. In 1948, the nation of Israel was re-established after some 2,000 years. In 1967, after the Six Day War, the Jews had complete control of the city of Jerusalem for the first time in well over 2,000 years. Because dispensationalists believe both the book of Revelation as well as Jesus' words in Matthew 24 are only about the future, they interpret those events back in 1948 and 1967 as the fulfillment of this statement by Jesus. "Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." (Mt 24:32-34 NIV) By the way, you'll recall that other

Christians, including me, believe those verses were fulfilled by the temple's destruction in 70 AD. But the establishment of Israel as nation indicated to some that Jesus would now return in a generation – somewhere between 20-40 years - depending on how you define a generation. Grand projections were made. Dates were set. Forty years from 1948 was 1988. Forty years from 1967 was 2007. Unless we all missed something, Jesus did not return. But the date setting and date revising continues on today. New theories are advanced. New calculations are argued.

Along the way, we've seen the birth and growth of Christian Zionism. What is that? Well, first let's define Zionism as an international movement originally for the establishment of a Jewish national or religious community in Palestine and later for the support of modern Israel. Christian Zionists are Christians who are convinced that the modern state of Israel is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and, as a result, argue that all Christians must support the state of Israel. Some go further and insist that since the geographical tract of land known as the Holy Land belongs to Israel according to God's promises, the state of Israel has a God-given right to evict the Palestinian people from that territory – just like Joshua removed the Canaanites in the Old Testament.

There are so many problems with Christian Zionism that it's hard to know where to begin a critique. Sound principles for interpreting Scripture are violated. For instance, historical Old Testament texts that describe the geographical range of the Promised Land are understood now as prophecies when that was never the intent of the Old Testament author. Old Testament passages that clearly teach that Israel's possession of the land was never unconditional are ignored and downplayed. God promised the land to the nation of Israel if they obeyed Him and stayed faithful to Him. They did not do so. It's my belief that Israel and Jewish people have forfeited any divine right to any geographic territory because of their consistent disobedience to God. Besides, the nation of Israel today is a secular state. It makes no claim to follow even the Old Testament! Current events happening today are read back into biblical texts and made to be their intended meaning. But even if you buy into the theology, it baffles me how Christian Zionists can so easily ignore and show so little concern for the historical and moral rights of the Palestinian people – and especially fellow Palestinian Christians – who often legally owned property for centuries before the birth of the nation of Israel. For some reason, justice and righteous dealings between human beings is set aside because God supposedly gave Jewish people the land of Palestine. Doesn't God demand justice regardless of who possesses the land? Doesn't even the Old Testament say that aliens living in the land should be treated righteously?

Does ethnic, national Israel and the Jewish people have a special destiny regarding the end times? Many evangelical Christians would say "Yes" in a heart-beat. Let me offer a few alternate conclusions based on my study of the Scripture. Sure, I could be wrong, but my view of Scripture is just as high as anybody in this room. First, nothing in the New Testament explicitly links the re-establishment of Israel as a nation with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. There are very sound, good reasons to support the state of Israel for historical and moral reasons. I certainly believe Israel has every right to exist. That's not the same as saying that Israel has a biblical right to the territory it

currently occupies. Second, I don't find any information in the New Testament that either the nation of Israel or the Church of Jesus Christ should be concerned about real estate. Does the New Testament really teach there is something holier and more sacred about the actual land that makes up Israel or Palestine? Where? Doesn't the New Testament teach instead that God is present wherever Jesus is present? Jesus is at the right hand of God, but He's also among His people, the Church. We are His Body and we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Wherever Jesus is – that's holy ground! Wherever Jesus' people are – that's holy ground! And God has given His chosen people – the Church of Jesus Christ - the whole world not just one small portion of it.

Thirdly, preserving a unique role for Israel and the Jewish people minimizes the New Testament focus on the Church. That's derived from what I said earlier about the true Israel being the Church and the Church being the real Israel of God. But here's a final conclusion that you might find surprising, but you should at least be aware of it. Many Christians who are not dispensationalists believe that the New Testament teaches that ethnic Jews may yet experience a mass conversion before Jesus' second coming. The key passage is found in Romans where Paul writes, "I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. And so all Israel will be saved...." (Rom 11:25-26 NLT) Nobody is saying the nation of Israel will be restored to its Old Testament glory days. Instead, some look at that passage and believe that before Jesus returns many Jews will put their faith in Jesus and become a part of the body of Christ, the Church, the true Israel of God. Well, perhaps. I hope so! Regardless, we can and should pray that many more Jewish people will enter into the full blessing of their heritage and become followers of Yeshua, their Messiah. By the same token, we can and should pray that any and every people group – Australians, Nigerians, Indians, Chinese, Italians – will be swept into the Kingdom of God as well and become part of God's forever family.

Soccer season was starting once again. A bunch of five year olds had gathered for the very first practice of the Bombers who played in the Micro-League of soccer "stars." At that first practice, a little practice game featured the white shirts on the team versus the blue shirts. As they began, a little boy who spoke no English wandered over from the playground equipment over to the sidelines of the game. He watched. He waited. Then he seemed to disappear altogether. But now there were thirteen Bombers running up and down the field instead of just twelve. The boy, perfectly camouflaged in blue shorts and a white t-shirt, had joined the white team. He ran, he passed, he kicked, and he smiled. No one seemed to notice that he wasn't a part of the team. No one said yet, "He hasn't paid the fees! The proper forms and releases have not been signed!" Soon, however, a ball rolled into a mother's lap, and as the new boy ran to fetch it, the mom innocently said to the coach, "He's not on the team." The kids, who hadn't even noticed that a new friend was on the field, stopped. The coach looked down at the now very dirty boy, saying, "He's not? Hmm." There was a pause as the boy looked up at the coach, who held his soccer fate on that day, in his hands. Finally the coach made his judgment. He put his hand on the boy's small back and said, "Come on! Let's play soccer!" And off all thirteen Bombers ran.

Not one of us here today deserves to be on God's team. We haven't earned it. Nor have we have we paid the price ourselves to make it possible. Yet, in His grace, Jesus chooses us to be on the best team in the universe – God's forever family. And part of that privilege means inviting others to join His team.