

God's Chosen People

God has always had faithful followers who would stand for truth and justice even in the face of great opposition.

Before the Flood, Enoch walked with God, and after the Flood, Noah became the father of the human race. He and his family were the only ones saved from the destruction of the evil world.

Abraham was given the promise that through his descendants all nations would be blessed. This promise was to be realized through Abraham's son Isaac, and his son Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28).

Genesis 32 reminds us that Israel was not Jacob's natural name. God renamed him Israel after he wrestled with an angel and refused to let the angel go until he received pardon for his sins. When Jacob received this blessing, his heart was renewed. His name change signified a change in character: Jacob means "deceiver" whereas Israel means "God contends."

No longer did Jacob need to rely on his own deceiving wit to get by. God promised to contend on Jacob's behalf. In the same way, Israel's descendants were God's chosen people. The nation of Israel fulfilled the covenant between God and Abraham their forefather (Genesis 15:18; Psalm 105:9-10).

There is much confusion today about the Biblical idea of the Israel of God. Many think that today's nation of Israel is also spiritual Israel—the fulfillment of God's promises to ancient Israel. They expect the restoration of Israel in the Middle East.

However, along the way, literal Israel gave up its right to be God's missionary nation. In its place, spiritual Israel is arising to be God's new covenant people. Who is spiritual Israel? And what does God's ancient promise to Abraham mean for Christians today?

Old Covenant Israel

The Old Testament is full of God's promises to His people Israel. But these were not simply one-sided vows. They were two-sided covenants that required absolute compliance from both parties.

After God helped the Israelites escape from Egypt, He entered into a covenant with them (Exodus 19:1-8). He said that Israel was to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They were to spread God's light to all people on Earth (see Isaiah 60:1-3). But this covenant was conditional to obedience:

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine (Exodus 19:5, emphasis added).

The promise involved an “if.” Later, King David and his son Solomon were told that their family would always be on the throne of Israel, if they would obey:

If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee a man on the throne of Israel (1 Kings 2:4, emphasis added).

This promise was repeated in 1 Kings 9:5-7:

Then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel for ever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man on the throne of Israel. But if ye shall at all turn from following me, ye or your children, and will not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them: Then I will cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for my name, I will cast out of my sight; and Israel shall be a proverb and a byword among all people.

Forfeiting the Blessing

Deuteronomy 28:1-14 contains a list of blessings God promised to Israel—the most wonderful blessings ever given. Again, these promises were conditional to obedience. Strict warnings were given about the curses that would occur if Israel chose not to obey.

Unfortunately, Israel did not keep God's commands, and became even more corrupt than the nations around them (2 Kings 17:6-23). Disobedience barred Israel from receiving its promised blessings.

In fact, all of Israel's tribes except Judah and Benjamin were carried away into captivity by the king of Assyria and disappear from history. A century and a half later, even Judah was plucked from the Promised Land and scattered in the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Nevertheless, some remained faithful to God even in exile. Daniel and his friends were willing to face death rather than disobey God.

God gave Israel a second chance. They were to return to their land after 70 years of exile (Jeremiah 31:10-14; Isaiah 43:1-13) and rebuild the temple. They would again have the opportunity to be witnesses to the nations (Micah 4:1-4; 5:2-6; Zechariah 8:20-23). Again, all these promises were conditional to obedience (Zechariah 6:15). Daniel's prophecies predicted the coming of the Messiah, but Israel rejected the Messiah, forfeiting its covenant role and the covenant promises:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord (Matthew 23:37-39).

New Covenant Israel

When the Jewish nation rejected the Messiah, the Gospel was spread to all nations. All who believe in the name of Jesus can now become the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:16, 29; Romans 4:16; 9:3-8).

The apostle Paul calls Christians "the Israel of God" and "the circumcision." God gave circumcision to Abraham as a symbol of belonging to God's people. When Paul refers to all Christians as "the circumcision," he reminds us that the Kingdom of God and the covenant promises associated with it were taken from the Jews and passed on to spiritual Israel.

Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder (Matthew 21:43-44).

Any who permit Christ to transform them and to change their character receive the new name of "Israel," just as Jacob did thousands of years ago.

Jesus did not choose 12 disciples by accident. Just as the 12 patriarchs were the founders of ancient Israel, so these 12 men are the foundation stones of new Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). The subsequent choice of 70 others is modeled after the choice of 70 elders by Moses in ancient Israel (Numbers 11:16).

A Spiritual Tree

The real Israel of God is "a remnant chosen by grace" (Romans 11:5 NIV). In Romans 11:17-24, Paul speaks of the olive tree that represents Israel. The branches (Jews) were broken off because of unbelief and the wild olive shoots (Gentiles) were grafted in to share in the nourishment of the tree.

The natural branches could be grafted back into the tree if they accepted the conditions. God is no respecter of nations or individuals. All who turn to Him will be accepted:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him (Romans 10:12 NKJV).

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26).

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and

they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you (John 15:5-7 NKJV).

The new Israel inherits God's covenant promises. Those who have accepted Christ become the chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (Compare 1 Peter 2:9-10 with Exodus 19:5-6).

The human race is in desperate need of redemption. God yearns to forgive and cleanse (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4). It is the role of the Church to carry this news to the world.

Spiritual Decline and Reformation

The history of God's Church is a roller coaster ride of spiritual ups and downs. Ancient Israel was constantly wavering between following God's commands and choosing the ways of the pagan nations around them, and Church since Bible times has been no different.

New covenant Israel, just like literal Israel, experienced a moral decline and turned towards the worship of other gods. The principles of heathen sun worship found their way into the Church. And under the guidance of the Roman Church, sun worship even began to counterfeit the very Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Throughout this period of spiritual decline, there were people who clung to the Word of God, but they were persecuted for their faith. Among these were the Waldenses in Europe. After withdrawing to the Alps because of persecution, they fully separated from the Roman Church.

The Waldenses were a remnant that kept the light of God's Word alive in this period of terrible spiritual darkness. They were ruthlessly massacred for their faith by Catholic leaders in a series of campaigns—particularly those led by D'Oppede in 1544, the Marquis of Pianesse in 1655, and Gabriel of Savoy in 1686.

The Protestant Reformation: Victory and Defeat

In England, John Wycliffe wrote about a need to reform. Huss and Jerome, invigorated by his writings, brought reform to Bohemia. They were both burned at the stake in the early 15th century, but the Reformation forged ahead despite persecution.

One by one, the reformers uncovered precious truths that had been hidden among false doctrine and superstition. Justification by faith and the once-for-all atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ were the cornerstones of the reformers' faith.

The reformers discarded many unBiblical teachings, such as veneration of saints and relics, the mass, purgatory, the mass, celibacy, the numerous sacraments, and faith in tradition rather than in the Word of God. The Protestant reformers were also virtually unanimous in identifying the papal system as the "man of sin," equated with the little horn of Daniel 7.

Martin Luther was one of the most prominent reformers used by God to call the world out of darkness. Luther and many others each rediscovered a piece of the truth. Together, they could have created a highway for the Gospel.

However, the followers of Luther, Calvin, Knox, Wesley, and other great reformers ventured no further along the path of Gospel light than their leaders had. They crystallized their beliefs, shutting out any doctrine that did not fit into their creed.

Instead of forging a way for collective truth, the Reformation resulted in the formation of many denominations. Each held aspects of the truth, but none accepted total truth. Satan had once again achieved a victory.

The present wave of cooperation between the churches is based not on issues of the Gospel, but on social issues. There is nothing separating the reformed churches from Rome. The Reformation's aim—the unveiling of the Gospel—has once again been curtailed.

The Final Reformation

The ups and downs of the Church continue even to this day. But we can have hope, knowing that God is the strongest and He will prevail.

God has promised that His power will come in these end times, just like at Pentecost when He empowered the newborn Church to preach the Gospel. This time, however, God is empowering His people to finish His work on the earth.