

Israel: Past, Present, and Future #16

Galatians 6:15-16

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Is the New Covenant Church the New Israel? That is the question we shall seek to answer in this final sermon in our series on Israel: Past, Present, and Future.

Before considering that question, let's briefly review what we have covered in this series of sermons.

Under Israel Past, we have seen that the Lord graciously chose Abraham and his posterity to be the trustees of His precious covenant promise of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) who would bring salvation, not to just one nation, but to all the nations of the world. Included in that gracious covenant was the promise of a specified earthly land that ultimately pointed to a heavenly Promise Land. God miraculously delivered His people from Egyptian bondage, brought them through the Red Sea, formed Israel into a covenanted nation and church at Mt. Sinai, and 40 years later brought them into possession of the Promise Land where they lived as long as they were faithful to the Lord, but were oppressed and led into captivity when they were unfaithful and rebelled against the Lord. Throughout Israel's history, the promise of the coming Messiah was ever presented to God's people through prophecies and ordinances.

Under Israel Present, we have seen that God kept His promise in sending His only begotten Son to be the Prophet, Priest, and King for His people at the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Jesus came unto His own people (Israel), but His own received Him not. Israel as a nation rejected Him as Messiah/Savior, conspiring with the Romans to crucify Him. God's righteous judgment fell upon the nation of Israel as witnessed by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. by the Romans. The Apostle Paul views Israel at the present time as God's enemy in rejecting Christ and His gospel, but at the same time Paul views Israel as beloved for the sake of God's gracious covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This should likewise be our present understanding of Israel as a nation. Like Paul, we should earnestly pray for the salvation of Israel. Israel's present status as a nation in the land should not be interpreted to be a realization of promised blessings, for Israel is yet God's enemy, is yet a Christ-rejecting nation, and is not dwelling in peace and safety.

Under Israel Future, we have seen that the Lord has promised both a national conversion of Israel to Jesus Christ at which time she will be grafted back into the olive tree of the Visible Church from which she was broken off. There will be no divinely approved rebuilt temple, or re-established priesthood, sacrifices, ceremonies, or feast days of the Old Covenant. Israel as a nation will also be restored to her land to dwell in it in peace and safety with her fellow Christian nations.

Now let us move on to consider the question: Is the New Covenant Church the New Israel? The answer is Yes and No.

I. **Yes—the New Covenant Church Is the New Israel.**

A. In what sense is the New Covenant Church the New Israel?

1. It is so in an ecclesiastical sense. Remember that Israel of old was both a nation civilly and ecclesiastically—it was both a state (with a civil government) and a church (with an ecclesiastical government). The church and state of Israel had distinct leaders and laws (King Uzziah learned the hard way).
2. Just as we have seen in past sermons that the Old Testament temple is realized in the New Testament temple—the New Covenant Church (composed of both Jews and Gentiles, 2 Corinthians 6:16). Just as we have seen that the Old Covenant priesthood is realized in the New Covenant priesthood of Jesus

Christ—the priesthood of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:15-18). Just as we have seen that the Old Covenant sacrifices are realized in the once-offered sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross for the sins of His people (Hebrews 9:26). So, likewise, Old Covenant Israel as a church is realized in the New Covenant Israel as a church. Certainly, the name, Israel, is used in the New Testament predominantly in an ethnic, national sense (as we have seen in Romans 11), but I submit that the name, Israel, is also used in the New Testament in an ecclesiastical sense for the New Covenant Church (consisting of Jews and Gentiles). The Old Covenant temple is used in the New Testament for the New Covenant temple or church (consisting of Jews and Gentiles—1 Peter 2:5. Another name given to Israel/Jews is the “circumcision” and to the Gentiles, the “uncircumcision” (Galatians 6:15), but that name is also given to the New Covenant Church (consisting of Jews and Gentiles) who are the true circumcision (Philippians 3:3).

B. Let us consider the phrase, “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). Is this only referring to Jewish Christians or is it referring to both Jewish and Gentile Christians—the New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ?

1. This Letter to the Galatian Churches was penned by Paul and occasioned by churches being divided by certain false teachers that claimed to believe in Christ and yet taught that in addition to faith in Christ, Christians (particularly Jewish Christians) needed to be circumcised (Acts 15:1). Paul argues that this is a false gospel, for one is justified by grace through faith alone in Christ alone (as was true of Abraham who was justified before he was circumcised, Galatians 3:11). These Judaizers were not tolerated by Paul (though they professed faith in Christ). Paul contends that when circumcision is added to faith in Christ for justification, then there is no end to all that must be added—we must then keep the whole law to be justified before God (Galatians 5:1-3). This heresy denied the complete sufficiency of Christ’s righteousness and sacrifice for His people. It was to earn by our works of righteousness what only Christ’s work of righteousness could purchase.

2. As a result, these false teachers promoted divisions in the Churches of Galatia between Jewish believers and Gentile believers—they taught that Jewish believers had greater privileges than Gentile believers because God had given them such ceremonies as circumcision (dietary laws, feasts and festivals, etc. which needed to be kept as well). In Galatians 4, Paul argues that to re-establish these as religious ceremonies to be kept was to return to the infancy of the Old Covenant Church. These churches were in great confusion and schism by means of these false teachers. The same is true today when churches add to worship what God has not authorized in the New Covenant (Messianic Judaism, Hebrew Roots Movement, Church of Rome, and even Protestant Churches—Lent)—it brings schism into Christ’s Church.

3. As we consider Galatians 6:16, there are two designations of Christians mentioned: (1) those who walk according to the rule of the gospel (God’s Word) mentioned in Galatians 6:15; (2) the Israel of God. Are these two different groups (the first consisting of converted Gentiles and the second of converted Jews), or are these two designations referring to one group, consisting of converted Jews and Gentiles? The consensus position of historic Reformed commentators of the First and Second Reformations is that “the Israel of God” is the same group as and further describes those who walk according to the rule of the gospel (the “and”, *kai*, may be connective or descriptive—Romans 15:6; Revelation 17:11). What other biblical reasons are there for this position?

a. Paul in Galatians 6:15 does not want there to be any distinction between Jews and Gentiles in their status in the church, but rather Paul emphasizes what is true of all who are in Christ—they are a new creation (this he does earlier in Galatians 3:28). Paul is nailing the false teachers who want to exalt Jewish Christians, and he gives the title of the Israel of God to all walk according to the rule in Galatians 6:15.

b. Paul in Galatians 6:16 does not make an ethnic distinction between Gentiles and Jews (as he does in Romans 11:25-26). Had Paul called the first group “Gentiles who follow the rule of the gospel”, it would have been clear he meant Jewish Christians were “the Israel of God” (but he doesn’t).

c. Jewish and Gentile believers are called Abraham’s seed (Galatians 3:29). So

likewise, the circumcised and uncircumcised of Galatians 6:15 who walk by the rule of the gospel are called the Israel of God, i.e. the people of God—God’s covenant people (Galatians 6:16).

II. Is the New Covenant Church the New Israel? No—the New Covenant Church Is Not the New Israel.

A. Though the New Covenant Church is the New Israel **ecclesiastically**, the New Covenant Church is not the New Israel **nationally**. The New Covenant Church has replaced/superseded the Old Covenant Church, but the New Covenant Church has not replaced or superseded Israel as a nation. The nation of Israel though presently under God’s righteous judgment as an enemy of the gospel and of Jesus Christ will be sovereignly and graciously turned from her rebellion and will be granted faith to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord and repentance to grieve over having rebelled against their Messiah (Zechariah 12:10; Romans 11:26). She will not plant her own olive tree as distinct from the New Covenant Church, but will be grafted back into the one olive tree (the Visible Church) with the nations of the world.

B. The promises of Abraham were always intended for those who have the faith of Abraham in trusting in Christ—Abraham’s seed. There were always those who were only Abraham’s seed as to the flesh, and there were always those who were Abraham’s seed in the spirit and by faith in Christ (whether they were Jews or Gentiles). That is why Israel’s establishment as a nation in 1948 and her present living in the land cannot be the fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As we have learned from our study of Zechariah 12-14, there is yet coming a time when the nations will arise against Israel and will overcome her as God’s righteous judgment, but out of that judgment, Israel as a nation will cry unto the Lord Jesus in faith, and He will miraculously save her from her sins and deliver her from all her enemies. The gospel will go forth mightily at that time to bring all nations and all Israel as a nation to Christ (Romans 11:25-26).

C. Application

1. Nothing I have said in outlining Israel’s rejection of Christ or God’s judgment upon Israel should be construed to mean that we are to hate Jews (or Palestinians). They all need Jesus. Our certain hope is that all nations will be brought to Jesus and into Christ’s Church to be brothers/sisters in Christ where there is neither Jew nor Palestinian. Paul earnestly prayed for Israel’s salvation, and should we (Romans 10:1). God grant us Paul’s zeal to pray for our own covenant-breaking nation, for family/friends/enemies. Paul’s heart was broken. Is ours?

2. Paul’s words about a mere outward form of religion in which one places his/her faith in an ordinance to save them (as did the Judaizers) are intended for us all that we might beware that our faith be in Christ to save us. What ordinances He has given to us are means of grace, not the object of our faith (baptism etc.). Jesus brought the same truth to the ears of the Pharisees who believed their mere outward practice of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (and obedience to God’s Law) would be sufficient to justify them before God (that was the point of the Parable of the Pharisee and Publican). What is absolutely essential to true, biblical religion is a new creation in which God freely out of His amazing love and grace reaches down to us to give us life, faith, love, hope, and new obedience. All false religion focuses on man first reaching out to God. Biblical Christianity focuses on God first reaching out to man through Jesus Christ and changing us from the inside out so that our obedience to His ordinances and commandments is not in order to earn His acceptance, but is our response of love because we are accepted by faith alone in the Beloved. Mercy cannot be pulled from God by our efforts, it is freely given to sinners who deserve His condemnation.

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