

# PAUL'S THEOLOGY

## *Lesson 49*

### The Church - Israel

On December 18, 1956, a television show made its debut on CBS. The show was called, *"To Tell The Truth."* The show continued intermittently through 2002. While I never watched it much, I do remember the premise and a choice line. The premise was that three people would appear, claiming to be a certain individual. In truth, only one of the persons was truly the named individual; the other two merely pretended to be that person. A panel would ask questions of the three people, trying to discern who was genuine and who was faking. The key line I remember came at the end of the show when the moment of truth arrived. The host would announce, "Will the real Mr. So and So please stand up?" After a couple of fakes by imposters, the one "real" person would then arise to the applause and occasional gasp of the audience.

This bears a bit of relevance to our lesson today as we consider the Old Testament teaching on Israel and the promises of God toward Israel. We will ask the question of whether those promises apply to the nation of Israel, the genetic descendants of Abraham, or perhaps to the church as the "Israel of God" or the "Israel of faith." Our goal today is to place Israel into its proper perspective vis-à-vis the church, especially in light of Paul's teaching. We then ask the question, "Will the real Israel please stand up?"

Recently in our pulpit in the worship assembly we had a leader from Jews for Jesus speak. Early in his presentation he noted that some are still amazed at the idea that there are "Jews for Jesus." Pausing with appropriate comedic timing, he added that the stunning idea in the first decade of the church was the reverse, that there might ever be Gentiles for Jesus!

His observation was a reminder of how that the church has changed over the centuries from its starting point. I have always enjoyed the inverted symmetry Luke sets out in his historical books of "Luke" and "Acts." The books begin in the heart of Israel, both the people and the country. They trace the ministry of Jesus in his great popularity both in Judea and Jerusalem. Then as an hourglass funnels down in size, the popularity of Jesus drops to less than a handful of supporters attending to him at Calvary. Jesus is then placed alone in a tomb, and a story that by all human accounts should end, takes a weekend pause. On resurrection Sunday, the following of Jesus begins to grow again. Just as the hourglass expands below the narrow midsection, we see the following of Jesus grow larger and larger, ultimately eclipsing the ministry's size and scope in its pre-Calvary zenith. We continue to see the hourglass grow as Jesus' followers grow

throughout Jerusalem, throughout the Judean region, across the Gentile barrier and eventually to the very heart of the Empire in Rome.

This spectacular and miraculous growth could not have taken place simply among the Jewish world. Gentiles came into the church in great numbers and, history has shown, ultimately became the numerically dominant people of Christ. These Gentiles knew that the Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament, were irrevocable words of God. As they studied these scriptures, they naturally came across questions about God's promises to Israel and Abraham.

In multiple places the people would read of God telling Abraham of his eternal blessings. For example, in Genesis 17:4-8 God said to Abraham,

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

What was the meaning of this? These questions took heightened importance in the early church after the Jews were decimated and their temple destroyed by the warring Romans in 70 AD.

Justin Martyr<sup>1</sup> wrote a dialogue with a Jew named Trypho in the mid-second century. In that dialogue, Justin asserted that the promises of God to Israel were in fact promises to the Christian church. Justin explained,

For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Church History lesson #13 at [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com).

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*, Ch. 11, quoted from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans 1989 printing), vol. 1 at 200.

Somewhere around 395 AD, St. John Chrysostom<sup>3</sup> wrote in his commentary on Galatians that people should seek the new things of grace adding,

For they who pursue these things shall enjoy peace and amity, and may properly be called by the name of “Israel.” While those who hold contrary sentiments, although they be descended from him (Israel) and bear his appellation, have yet fallen away from all these things, both the relationship and the name itself.<sup>4</sup>

Is the church indeed the fulfillment of the promises of God? Do the Jews still play a role in God’s salvation drama? If so, what role? Are Jews saved in the same manner that Christians are? These questions are in play as we consider what Paul teaches on the church and Israel.

## THE PASSAGES

The core passage we need to consider as we discuss this is found in Romans, chapters 9-11. There are other passages worthy of a further study found in 2 Corinthians and Galatians, but they are beyond the scope of this single class on the subject. Time and format do not allow a verse-by-verse exposition of these passages, but the framework for understanding them is set out in this lesson. The reader is urged to use this lesson as a springboard for more personal study on these points and passages. The Romans 9-11 section of Paul’s writing is considered by most scholars to be one of the most difficult passages of Paul’s to understand, if not the most difficult. There are a number of good commentaries one can go to for presentations of various interpretations of the difficult chapters.

In the spirit of this series, we will try to focus on the core parts of the passages as they teach on the subject of Israel and God’s people in Christ. Before we do so, we first set out the problem and three of the often-cited potential solutions:

**The Problem:** God made repeated promises, often termed a “covenant” with Abraham and certain of his descendants, calling them his “chosen people” and giving them certain blessings throughout all generations. Yet with the advent of Christ, we see the Jews (the genetic offspring of Abraham) mostly in rejection of Christ and we see the Gentiles making up over 99 percent of the church. What happened to God’s covenant with Abraham?

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<sup>3</sup> See Church History lesson #30 at [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com).

<sup>4</sup> See Chrysostom, Commentary on Galatians, Ch. 6, verse 16, quoted from *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans 1988 printing), vol. 13 at 47. Chrysostom, no mean biblical scholar, does add that the Jews have the power to be believers, writing, “But it is in their power to be true Israelites, who keep this rule [of grace], who desist from the old ways, and follow after grace.”

## Potential Solutions:

- (1) **REPLACEMENT** -- Israel's disobedience and rejection of Jesus nullified God's covenant and his promises and God then gave a new covenant to what is now termed "the church" (referring to Christians universally).
- (2) **DUALITY AND PARITY** -- Israel's disobedience and rejection of Jesus has not nullified God's covenant, but it has left it in abeyance until some later date when there will be a massive conversion of the Jewish nation and a fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.
- (3) **MUTUALITY** -- Israel has always held the promises in their context, but Abraham's covenant found its Jewish completion in Christ, and Gentiles have been "grafted onto the tree" of promises so that we see both Christians and some number of Jews still in possession of a new covenant that both fulfills the old covenant and sets out a new covenant as well.

As we read these three choices, the edges of one might seem a bit fuzzy with those of another. Each of the choices might sound a bit different depending upon who is speaking of them. Each also has a certain amount of appeal, although we will suggest the third one is most scripturally supported, and is the one that best advances Paul's teachings.

If we pause and consider the first choice, that the Jews nullified the covenant and that God has set out a new covenant with the church, we see this especially as a view easily read into the church of the third century forward. This view works with a spiritualizing of the promises to Abraham and the Patriarchs. The church is seen as the "spiritual Israel" who has inherited the "spiritual understanding" of the promises to Abraham (Gal. 6:16). So instead of Christians inhabiting the real Jerusalem, they will eternally have the "spiritual" or "eternal" New Jerusalem seen by John the Revelator (Rev. 21:9-27). This view can see Solomon's Temple as simply a reflection of the Temple Paul wrote of that is the church (1 Cor. 3). The captivity and disbursement of Jews can be seen as a prophetic indication that the failure of the Jews to live up to their end of the covenant would result in their removal from the Promise Land and God's covenantal promises (2 Chron. 36:16). Historically some have used this view to justify persecution of Jews in the name of Christianity, claiming the Jews were unfit rejecters of God, the Messiah, and God's church and people.

The second view is that there is a New Covenant added to the Old Covenant and that at some point the Jews will see massive conversion. This view is very apocalyptic, seeing God's promises as irrevocable, and so validating the literal promises of God to Israel, even though much of history might set those promises in doubt. For example, Israel is set to possess the Promised Land (Gen. 17:1-8; 26:1-6; 35:9-15) and even though there may be periods where through

disobedience where Jews do not occupy the land before the end of time, the Jews will come into full possession of the land. This view will point to the amazing re-occupation of much of the Holy Land starting in 1947 after almost 2,000 years of absence. This view takes Paul's reference to the "partial hardening" that came upon Israel as a temporary matter that changes in the end days once "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in," whereupon "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26).

The third view might seem a hybrid of the other two views, but it is not really. Being the view of this paper, we set out the third view in more detail than views one and two as we consider the scriptures at issue.

A core to understanding the third view is to first recognize that God's promises to Abraham never applied to every physical descendant of Abraham. Throughout the Old Testament and throughout Paul's teaching as well, there was recognition of a "remnant" that truly were recipients of the promises. Paul makes this point as he reminded the Romans,

For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. For this is what the promise said: "About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son." And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom. 9:6-12).

This same remnant idea was seen in the return from captivity of certain numbers of Jews, but certainly not all Jews (Ez. 2). From this we can fairly decide that God's promises to Abraham were never promises to *all* of his offspring, but simply to a remnant set of the offspring.

Paul is able to use the image of an olive tree when speaking of the descendants of Abraham (Rom. 11:16-24). The image is not new to Paul. Jeremiah had already prophesied over Israel as "a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit" (Jer. 11:16). Paul can consider the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) the "holy" roots of this tree (Rom. 11:16) even though a number of their genetic offspring are branches that are broken off (Rom. 11:17). Even Jeremiah noted that God would come to Israel as an olive tree, "and with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed (Jer. 11:16)." For Paul, the true Israel that

was an olive tree were those who were respondent to and obedient to Christ, and thus chosen by God (Rom. 9). Paul details this understanding in Rom. 9:27-29:

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved, for the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay." And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us offspring, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."

Seeing then the tree to be rooted in the Patriarchs, Paul saw the tree receiving God's promises of "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4). Most importantly, it is through the promises of God in this tree rooted in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Rom. 9:5).

To follow the tree analogy of Paul to its conclusion, we need to see one more thing – the role of Gentiles. Paul explained that while the genetic offspring without faith in Christ are "broken off because of their unbelief" (Rom. 11:19); the Gentiles never became their own separate tree with its own covenant and promises. Rather the Gentiles were grafted into the tree rooted in the Patriarchs and the promises of God. This should affect not only how Christians live toward God, but also how they live in harmony with the believing Jews on the branches<sup>5</sup>:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear (Rom. 11:17-20).

Christians under this view are seen as a continuation of Israel, God's people. As noted Pauline scholar Pere Cerfaux wrote:

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<sup>5</sup> This was a particular problem Paul was addressing in his Romans letter. Rome had undergone a time where Jews were expelled from the city. That would have left the church, at that point a Jewish based institution, in control of the Gentiles left in the city. Once the Jews were allowed to return to Rome, the church was faced with the issue of who the church belonged to, Gentile or Jew. Paul wrote Romans in the face of these issues seeking to set out the role of Jew and Gentile before God. For more on this see the lessons on Romans found in our series on the Life of Paul as well as from the Biblical Literacy. Both sets of lessons are available at [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com). See Life of Paul Lesson 23 and New Testament Biblical Literacy Lessons 48-52.

If God chooses the Christians, it is so that he may make them members of the privileged nation, giving them as ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the remnant of Israel... If the number of Jewish converts to Christianity is small, that is because they are the “remnant.”<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, we turn to consider what Paul wrote about the old and new covenant of God. In Romans 9:4 Paul wrote that to the Israelites belong the “covenants.” Paul wrote again of covenant in Romans 11:27 quoting Isaiah:

And this will be my **covenant** with them when I take away their sins.

Consider in this light 2 Corinthians where Paul contrasts the “old” covenant to the “new” covenant:

- Who has made us competent to be ministers of a new **covenant**, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6).
- But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old **covenant**, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away (2 Cor. 3:14).

The word Paul is using for covenant is *diatheke* (διαθηκη). It means to dispose of property by a will.<sup>7</sup> God had at his disposal certain things he covenanted or gave to Abraham and his descendants. These matters were never the full and final disposition of God. Even Isaiah had prophesied that another covenant would come that would further God’s giving. Paul quoted from Isaiah 59:20, 21:

"The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins."

So God gave his gifts in promise with an eye toward something even greater. Paul recognized that as Christ arrived in history, the ultimate disposition of God was manifested on earth and injected into the human race. The historical Israel had held the promises of God’s covenant as a custodian, and through the seed of Abraham came Jesus, the fullest possessor of God’s inheritance. In Christ, we now have a fulfilled old covenant – he inherited all – and a new covenant for the

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<sup>6</sup> Cerfaux, L., *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul* (Herder and Herder 1959) at 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> This is why we also use the term “testament” instead of covenant. From this came the phrase for the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament.”

“tree.” This new covenant is one that is written on the hearts of man rather than tablets of stone (Jer. 31:31-33). It is the covenant that proceeds from the very body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 11:24-26). It is the covenant of forgiveness of sins and eternal life (Rom. 11:27)!

Within the context of our “third potential solution” we need to consider also the prophetic implications of Paul in this section of Romans. Consider these passages:

- **Rom. 11:11-15** – “So I ask, did they [the Jews] stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”
- **Rom. 11:25-32** – “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

There is certainly merit in discussing the various meanings Paul might have in these passages. For example, in Romans 11:25 and 26 Paul wrote of the fullness of Gentiles coming in and in this way “all Israel” is saved. Paul could easily be referencing “all Israel” as the full tree – believing Jew and Christian Gentile together. It does seem, however, that Paul clearly foresaw that God would bring in a large number of Jews, a “full inclusion” at some point before the end of days.

## CONCLUSION

If we were involved in a game show, we would now have the host announce, “Will the real Israel, please stand up?” We would look at our three possibilities: the Old Testament people, the Church, or the faithful believers of the Old

Covenant alongside the grafted branches of believers from the Gentile world. I suspect the third should arise in answer to the question!

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“It is not as though the word of God has failed”* (Rom. 9:6).

Paul never remotely thought God had forsaken his promises to Abraham. These promises were irrevocable. God was faithful to the fullest measure. But we should realize with Paul that the promises were God’s to give, not man’s to receive. God always had an election in mind on his giving. Just as the Jews could be called “chosen people,” so we see that not all were “chosen.” From Abraham’s descendants God choose Jacob, not Esau (Rom. 9:13). God makes the choice to give his covenant, and he has done so faithfully to his promise and word. Time will never change God’s consistency and honesty. To those of us who rely on his promised mercies, that gives a wonderful peace.

2. *“And this will be my **covenant** with them when I take away their sins”* (Rom.11: 27).

Do you want land? Do you want the Ten Commandments and the Law that God gave at Sinai? Do you want a great pedigree of ancestors? How do those weigh in the balance of what you might like to have when compared to the forgiveness of your sins by the Judge of humanity? God fulfilled his covenant and all his promises came true in Jesus Christ, and a new covenant issued forth, a covenant that forgives sins by the body and blood of the Messiah. This is the covenant where we live and dwell, now and for eternity. This covenant is one, “not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). We have seen that the early covenant led to the second, both in the fulfillment of the first in Christ and the issuance of the new one from the same Christ. This is the covenant we all desperately need. For without it, no branch can really stay on the tree. Without it, even the roots of the tree perish, for even Abraham himself was truly saved by faith (Rom. 4:9).

3. *“It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring”* (Rom. 9:8).

The tree is rooted in Israel and the Patriarchs, and in one sense we can fairly call it the tree of Israel. But it is more than that. It is God’s tree of his people. Those people were selected descendants of Abraham, the “Old Testament faithful,” some might say. But after Christ, we see the faithful more clearly. The distinction between Jew and Gentile is gone in the church. God has called from all races (Rom. 9:24-29). When we walk

from this class, let every believer walk with faith that God has called her/him and made them his own. We are children of the one Almighty God!