

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS: ISRAEL AND THE NEW COVENANT

by Ray C. Stedman

All Christians rest upon the faithfulness of God. Our unchangeable God who never falters, never fails in His promise is the very foundation of our faith and the ground of our security. That is what gives stability and strength to our faith; we can count on it. We have the same God that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had, that David prayed to and wrote his Psalms in praise of -- all this constitutes for us the bedrock of security that we rest upon it in every single day.

But I want to explore with you now a somewhat different aspect of the faithfulness of God. I find a very strange phenomenon growing among Christians across the country and around the world today. Many are saying, "We can believe in the faithfulness of God for ourselves, but we doubt it when it comes to the nation of Israel." Many people raise the question, "What part does that strange people called in the Scriptures itself 'God's chosen people', play in the future?" Many have written the nation off as not having a part in the program of God.

Let's look at what God has said about his promises to that strange people. We wonder what God has in mind as we read the newspapers and see still centered in the headlines of the world this strange nation. And what is more remarkable, we know that many Jews are unbelievers in their own Scriptures. It's a very astonishing thing that they still exist as a nation after all the centuries of dispersion and wanderings. Many are asking the question, "Where do the Jews fit into the program of God?"

I want to begin by going back to the very center of our own Christian faith, the one ritual that all Christians agree is central -- the supper of the Lord. Periodically we gather together to celebrate the Lord's supper, to do together what he told us to do on that unforgettable night when he was betrayed. Let me refer to Matthew's familiar account (Matthew 25:26-29):

... Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And then he took the cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sin. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I will drink it new with you in my father's kingdom." {cf, Matt 26:25b-29}

Notice carefully the words that Jesus uses to introduce this event as he passes the cup among these disciples. He says, "this is my blood of the new covenant." Now that's a clear reference back to the words of Jeremiah found in the 31st chapter of his prophecy. Jeremiah says, beginning in Verse 31 of Chapter 31, these words:

**"The time is coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt [i.e., the covenant of the Law, the Ten Commandments],
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.**

"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel

after that time," declares the Lord.

"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more." {Jer 31:31-34 NIV}

Now that what was taking place on the night our Lord was betrayed. He was making a new covenant with the house of Israel; every one of those disciples that were there were faithful Jews. (Judas had already left the apostolic band to go to do his dirty work of betrayal.) The eleven disciples that were remaining were Israelites from various groups and various parts of the land of Israel. They were representatives of the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Our Lord borrows here the very words which Moses had used when he announced the covenant of the Law when he came down from Mount Sinai. You remember Moses sprinkled the people with blood from animals and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words," (Exod 24:8 {RSV}). It is not a mere accident that when Jesus, too, says, "this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Return to Jeremiah 31, the prophet goes on to say these words (Verse 35):

This is what the Lord says,
he who appoints the sun
to shine by day,
who decrees the moon and stars
to shine by night,
who stirs up the sea
so that the waves roar --
the Lord Almighty is his name:
"Only if these decrees vanish from my sight"
declares the Lord,
"will the descendants of Israel ever cease
to be a nation before me."

This is what the Lord says:
"Only if the heavens above can be measured
and the foundations of the earth below be searched out
will I reject all the descendants of Israel
because of all they have done," declares the Lord. {Jer 31:35-37 NIV}

Do these ordinances still exist today? Is the sun still shining in the sky? Do the moon and the stars still appear at night?

Isn't it remarkable that with all the achievements of science, and with all the explorations of space, the sending out of these space travelers out to explore the planetary system and even beyond, yet we still have not learned how to measure the universe in which we live. The prophet says, "Only if heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath..." We have done neither of those. We have found theories, but no one has been able to explore in this area.

Therefore, God says,

"If heaven can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done," says the Lord. {cf, Jer 31:37 KJV}

Now, that's a most remarkable promise. God has bound himself, by the faithfulness of his Being and of his Word, that Israel shall have a place in his program as long as the heavens and the earth remain. God will never cast them off as long as the sun and the moon maintain themselves in their courses and as long as the scope of the heavens remains to be measured and the interior of the earth remains unexplored.

Well, if that is the case, if this is the covenant which Jesus made with Israel, as the Lord's supper clearly indicates, we must ask ourselves the question: "Why is it that Israel lies in spiritual shambles today, while Gentile Christians, with whom this covenant was never made, are now enjoying the fulfillment of the new covenant?"

Many people wonder about this in regard to the Jews, and a number of explanations have been suggested. Most of you know that over in the 8th chapter of Hebrews, the writer quotes verbatim, word for word, this promise of God in Jeremiah 31. He makes clear that new covenant, referred to there, applies to the church. The new covenant was a covenant made with Israel, but it is being fulfilled today by believers from all the nations. The writer of Hebrews repeats the fact that that covenant was made with the house of Israel and Judah (that is, the whole literal nation of the Jews) but he applies three essential elements of this covenant to us today.

It is very helpful for us to understand that these terms and conditions of the new covenant are faithfully carried out whenever anybody turns to Christ. Listen to the provisions of the new covenant again, as the prophet Jeremiah had announced, but which are quoted in Hebrews 8:10:

**"I will put my law into their minds,
and write them on their hearts." {Heb 8:10b NIV}**

Here is the first provision of the new covenant: There will be a new awareness rising within us so that we know inwardly how to tell right from wrong.

I want you to think back to when you first came to Christ: You will discover that there came into your knowledge, your existence, your experience, a different feeling about right and wrong. Before you became a Christian, right and wrong were spelled out to you in terms of what you had been taught as you were growing up. Whether these standards were related to the Ten commandments or not, there was something external to yourself that constituted a set of standards imposed upon you from without. But, when you became a Christian, you suddenly became more sensitive in this area. That's the new covenant being fulfilled in our lives.

The second element of the New Covenant is that God has said,

**"I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest." {Heb 8:10c-11 NIV}**

Once again, if you think back to your first days as a believer in Jesus, you became aware that you had become a member of a new family and that God occupied a different relationship in your life. He was no longer a stern judge, condemning you every time you turned around, but he was now a loving Father. A new word came to your lips -- you began to call him *Father*. You sensed a new intimacy with God.

I'll never forget when I first became a Christian, I was only ten years old, and received the Lord in a Methodist camp meeting. The summer that followed that was an unforgettable summer to me because I had a constant consciousness of God in my life. I used to sing some of the hymns to myself over, and they would cause me

break into tears because I was so conscious of the nearness of God. That's what the new covenant does for us, the provision that God has made for everyone.

You begin also to discover when you meet other Christians that they feel the same way as you. They too know God, you didn't have to tell them. They also know him as their Father. They understand that same relationship you have been brought into. That's the greatness of the new covenant.

And then there is third element in the new covenant, one that is most important, given by these words:

**"For I will forgive their wickedness
and I will remember their sins no more." {Heb 8:12 NIV}**

Do you remember the lifting of the load of guilt in your life when you first came to Christ?

I'll never forget this in my own life. To me it was a wonderful thing to realize that all the mistakes and the ugliness of my past life, all the things I had done wrong, all the shameful episodes I would like to have forgotten were forgiven. I now had perfect access to my Father in heaven, there was now nothing between us -- He had taken care of it all by the blood of Jesus. Nothing in all of life meant more to me then, and does today, than that reality.

Most Christians, I think, fail to see that forgiveness is something we need every day. Even as Christians we go on sinning and making mistakes. Every day we need the cleansing of the blood of Jesus. Every day we need to admit to him that there are things that were wrong yesterday, or this morning; and claim again that wonderful promise, "I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more."

Now, that's the new covenant, wonderfully applied to us today, to us who are not Jews, who don't belong to the house of Israel.

There are some, of course, among us who are Jews -- all come into the church, whether Jew and Gentile, on the same basis. Now this is why some people have greatly misunderstood the promises to the Jews. They say that the church has replaced Israel. They say that we, the church, have taken over all the promises that were given to Israel. They claim that all these promises are now spiritually fulfilled in us, and, therefore, Israel no longer has a place in God's program and plan. Now, this teaching is pressed to the point sometimes where the church is often called the *new Israel* or *spiritual Israel*, titles that are never found in Scripture.

The idea is set forth that it was God's intent to reach us Gentiles, that this was the final goal. When the Gentiles became believers in God, all the promises of God were fulfilled and Israel would no longer have a place in God's plan. But, if you think that's true, then you've forgotten what Jeremiah has said regarding Israel and God's ordinances concerning the sun and the moon, and the inability of man to measure the heavens or to plumb the depths of the earth. When you got up this morning the sun rose, or, if you rose a little later, you could count on the sun having risen. As Jeremiah has reminded us, as long as those ordinances maintain in themselves in the earth, God has pledged that he will never cast off his people Israel but they have a place in his kingdom.

When you come to the book of Romans in the New Testament you discover that the Apostle Paul explains the apparent mystery. We learn that Israel has been *temporarily* set aside because of their unbelief. In Romans, Chapters 9, 10, and 11, the Apostle Paul deals at length with this problem: "Where does Israel fit in the program of God?" In these three remarkable chapters the apostle carefully distinguishes between the church and Israel:

The church -- which includes believing Jews and Gentiles alike -- is called the body of Christ, which the nation Israel never is. Paul distinguishes between the church, and the nation of Israel -- which consists only of Jews, and mostly unbelieving Jews, who do not even give credence to their own Scriptures.

In Chapter 9 the apostle describes for us some of these differences. Twenty-five years after the church was born, after it came into existence on the Day of Pentecost as you have recorded in the opening chapters of Acts,

the apostle admits that the unbelieving nation of Israel still has certain advantages which they cannot lose. He lists for us these advantages and distinctives in these opening words of Chapter 9:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit [See how he undergirds with the authority of God what he's about to say.], that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites [See, clearly Jews], and to whom [pertains or] belongs the adoption as sons of God, the glory [the Shekinah glory that filled the temple and the tabernacle], the covenants [those made with Abraham and with David, with Isaac and Jacob and with others throughout the Old Testament, the covenants including the new covenant], the giving of the Law [the Ten Commandments brought down from the mountain top, not by Charleton Heston, but by Moses himself], the temple service [that is, the tabernacle, the temple and its rituals of sacrifices and offerings], and the promises [of God, all belong to Israel -- and he goes on], whose are the fathers [the patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob], and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh [the Messiah], who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. {Rom 9:1-5 NASB}

Now that's a great statement. And in it the apostle is telling us what belongs to Israel by the faithfulness of God, and can never be set aside.

Now, in Chapter 11, Verses 15 and 16, he says something very interesting. Israel, he acknowledges at this point, had been set aside from its favored position before God. And God had turned to the Gentile world and had begun to take in pagans, unbelievers, idol worshippers, Gentiles who had no knowledge of all the great things that God had taught Israel in the Old Testament. In Verse 16, the apostle says:

For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy: {cf, Rom 11:16 KJV}

This is a reference to something the Jews would understand. The Jews have a ritual in which they take dough, a big pile of dough made up from the first grain that is harvested, the priest would take a handful of that dough and offer it before God in the tabernacle or the temple service. Paul's argument here is, if that offering, if that handful, was offered to God at the beginning as a holy offering, then the whole lump of dough would likewise be acceptable to God. Now the firstfruits of Israel were the patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were the men whom God called to himself. He accepted them and gave them the gift of eternal life, because of their faith, and that constituted the offering of firstfruit. And Paul is simply saying: Now if that was true, if he could accept these patriarchs and make them holy, then he could do the same thing with the whole nation of Israel. But then the apostle changes his figure -- and this is very important -- in the latter part of the verse:

and if the root is holy, so are the branches. {cf, Rom 11:16b KJV}

This time of the year is the bear root season and some of you may be planting roses and fruit trees, others of you will just be putting the bare root into the ground. Just before I came here from my home in Oregon, I planted some roses and I just took a bare root, with no growth on it at all, just a little bit of the stem sticking up, and I stuck it in the ground.

A root becomes a symbol of the *source* of life. The root that the apostle is referring to are those divine advantages that Jews possess, which he had described so clearly in Chapter 9 -- the Shekinah glory, the promises, the sacrifices in the temple, all that God had given to Israel -- that is the root he is referring to. He says that "if the root is holy then so are the branches." And he makes very clear the reality that God, therefore, can restore life to Israel because they still possess the root that God himself had given to them.

Now in Verse 17, the apostle goes on, and says:

... if some of the branches were broken off, [that is, the unbelieving nation of Israel] and you [he's talking to Gentiles -- notice Verse 13, "for I speak to you Gentiles"], being a wild olive [tree], were grafted in among them and became a partaker with them of the rich root

[and fatness] of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward [boast against] the branches [that is, Israel]; but if you are arrogant [do boast], remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. {Rom 11:17-18 NASB}

Here we learn how it is that we Gentiles got in on this new covenant that actually belongs to Israel. You see, the root still belongs to Israel -- but we Gentiles enjoy it by faith. God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles through the Apostle Paul and by the preaching of the other apostles. This is why the Lord Jesus said to the woman at the well of Samaria, "Salvation is of the Jews," (John 4:22b {KJV}).

If we Gentiles begin to feel superior and think that we have a favored position before God, if we suppose that Israel no longer has a place in God's program for the world, let us remember Paul's words here, "you do not support the root, but the root supports you."

In this same chapter of Romans, in Verse 11, Paul asks the key question,

I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? {Rom 11:11a KJV}

His answer is, "By no means!" {Rom 11:11b RSV}. Certainly not!

God has an appointed time when he will fulfill the promises of the new covenant to make Israel the head of the nations of the earth, and Jerusalem the center of the government of the earth. This is what he asks us to pray for when we pray the Lord's prayer,

"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt 6:10 {KJV})

This is why the disciples came to the Lord Jesus risen from the dead and they said to him, (as we are told in the opening verses of Acts),

"Will you at this time restore the kingdom unto Israel?" (Acts 1:6b {RSV})

Now, Jesus did not rebuke them for asking that question. All he did was correct their question about the timing. They said, "Will you *at this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?" This is after he'd been with them for 3 1/2 years and taught them much. But they still obviously expected that there would be a time coming when Israel would be restored as the head of the nations of the earth. The kingdom was to be the promises restored to Israel. But Jesus warned them, "Times are not for you to know," {cf, Acts 1:7}. Times are uncertain -- but events are not.

In Romans 11, Verse 12 and following, the Apostle Paul tells us what will happen when Israel does experience the fulfillment of the new covenant. Look at these words,

Now if their fall means riches for the world, {cf, Rom 11:12a KJV}

Did you ever realize that the greatest blessing any nation has ever had, in this whole age since the coming of our Lord, was the entrance of the gospel into that nation? The secular world does not want to recognize this. But you can prove this to yourself -- every nation where the gospel has been preached since the coming of the Lord, has been a nation where people have found freedom. Freedom always accompanies the teaching and the preaching of the Word of God. And wherever a nation has had the gospel once, found freedom, and then turned its back on God, that nation goes back into despair and into national oblivion. It loses its ability to function, to a large degree, as a nation. Totalitarian government and authoritarianism comes in and the people become virtual slaves.

Now, the greatest witness of this fact today is what has happened in the Soviet Union. Here is a people that 70 years ago turned its back on what it had known about the gospel, and threw out the moral absolutes of God, and tried instead to erect certain artificial absolutes supported only by intense government oppression. As a result the Russian people lost their freedom.

Turn away from God and you, too, will lose your freedom as an individual -- always. Freedom is the greatest riches that the world can know. Through the course of history today you can trace this out -- every nation that has received the gospel and given heed to the Word of God has been a nation blessed by God, blessed with freedom -- its people are relatively free. That's what Paul means, if the fall of Israel meant that God turned to the Gentiles and brought riches to them, then (now listen to this):

... and their failures riches to the Gentiles, how much more their fulness! For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am an apostle of the Gentiles, {cf, Rom 11:12b-13a KJV}

He goes on to tell us that, when the nation Israel believes, the nations of the world will be brought into greater riches than resulted from the failure of Israel. In fact, it will be like from death unto life! Look at Verse 15,

For if their rejection be the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? {Rom 11:15 NASB}

Most of you know your Bibles well enough to know that God's appraisal of the peoples of the world today is that they are lost, they are all dead in trespasses and sins -- that deadness, that death that produces violence, and anger, and hatred, and terrorism, and warfare, and crime, and all the other destructive things we see today -- that death which blights all the nations will end only when Israel accepts their Messiah. Then, at that time, the promise of the new covenant is fulfilled in their national life.

We know that will be the time when our Lord returns. As the prophet Zechariah and others tell us, Jesus will then personally assume the throne of his father David. And the twelve apostles will reign with Jesus -- as he specifically states back in Matthew 19:27. Let me read these words to you -- these are the words of Jesus himself,

Peter answered and said to him, "See, we have left all and followed you; therefore what shall we have?" [Now listen!] So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, [that is, the restoration that is coming] when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundred fold and inherit eternal life. {cf, Matt 19:27-29}

This is our Lord's own description of that coming kingdom which Revelation 20 tells us (six times over) will last for one thousand years, it is what we call *the millennium* .

To wind this up, the Apostle Paul confirms all these things in the eleventh chapter of Romans in these words in Verses 25-27. He says:

**I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written:
"The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will turn ungodliness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins." {Rom 11:25-27 NIV}**

What covenant? Why, the New Covenant. The New Covenant was made with the house of Israel and Judah on the night our Lord was betrayed, "This is the blood of the new covenant which is made with many for the remission of sins." So, you see, that which began at the first coming will be fulfilled in its entirety at the second. All of us, all Christians, have to live in a sense with between *the already* and *the not yet*. Already the Kingdom of God has begun within us but its not yet fully manifest or fulfilled upon the earth -- we have to live waiting for that promise.

Just before he died Dr. Francis Schaeffer, one of the major prophets of our day, was asked what he believed about the promises of God to Israel, and this is his reply. He says,

"I believe that if God can revoke his promises to the nation Israel then I have no assurance of my own personal salvation. I believe that at the end of the present age the Lord will return and establish his kingdom for one thousand years and the purpose of the millennium will be to demonstrate conclusively that man's problem is himself, and not Satan. Evil is present during the millennium, even though Satan is bound because evil in man is a result of the fall unless there be a regenerated experience. When Satan is released he will find thousands who will immediately respond to his call to mount a final rebellion against God."

We have the very promise of God.

Do you know that the Apostle Peter tells us that someday the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the earth shall be melted with fervent heat {cf, 2 Pet 3:10}. Those ordinances of the sun and the moon and the stars and the heaven and the earth will end in that day, and then the creation of a new heaven and a new earth shall come into being, where evil will no longer be present in any form whatsoever, as Peter, Isaiah, and other of the prophets predicted. But before that time comes, God promises he will fulfill every word spoken to that strange nation there in the Middle East. So Israel does have a part in the promises of God -- and our very existence as a church borrows from, and rests upon, those promises made to Israel long ago! That's the faithfulness of God.

Let us close in prayer,

Prayer

Thank you Father for the wonderful teaching of your Word that reminds us that once you give a promise you never go back on it. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable, you never take them back again. Our redemption rests on that. So Lord we thank you for the redemption of the nation of Israel from its unbelief today. We thank you for that in Jesus name, Amen.

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