

God's Firstborn People

By
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"Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: "Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn." ' "

-Exodus 4:22-23

For the past couple weeks I have been on a trip visiting Auschwitz, one of the largest Nazi death camps in World War 2, as well as touring Israel. During Israel, not only did I have the opportunity to see many of the holy sites for Christianity, like the Garden of Gethsemane and the Sea of Galilee, but I also saw Israel's border with Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, the "West Bank", and the site of the Nova music massacre, as well as talked with various survivors of the October 7th massacre in Israel and experts on the complexities concerning the region. While many things in this trip have stood out to me, each worthy of many hours worth of dialogue and understanding, the thing I wanted to write about today is the Biblical concept of Jewish "chosenness".

To be honest, the main reason why I wanted to go on this trip was to see Israel for myself, to see the areas of controversy and speak with the locals to see their perspectives. After all, Israel has been a lightning rod of controversy lately, and this one topic has split the Republican party and it is threatening to divide much of the church. And amongst the church, I believe at the center of our internal conflict is this idea of Jewish "chosenness".

On one hand, many Christians believe that the Jews *were* chosen by God in the Old Covenant, but, due to their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, God's chosen people are now exclusively the church. I wanted to say a quick note about this perspective before I speak of the other one, some Christians criticize this perspective as carrying a root of anti-Semitism. A distinction that I will make though is that while I believe that Christian anti-Semitism *requires* this belief, it doesn't *necessitate* it. Meaning that there are many Christians who hold this view that are not prejudiced in the slightest and who hold this view in good conscience before God.

On the other hand, there are Christians, I being one of them, who believe that while the church has been "grafted in" to the promises that God made to His people but we have

not replaced the Jewish people. We derive this belief from many passages in the Old and New Testament that are summarized by the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:

“For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.” Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.”

-Romans 11:16-20

Once again, it isn't as though Christians on the other side don't have a good way of understanding the above passage in a way that is contrary to mine, it is only to emphasize the point that this is where Christians like me found their conviction in the continued election of the Jewish people. Without going into the debate too much, for the sake of this paper I simply wanted to hone in on this definition of chosenness. What is this election that the church has been grafted into? How does it distinguish us from other people in the eyes of God, and, since Paul admits that the Israelites have indeed denied their Messiah, what does this concept mean for them today?

When I was asking myself this question this week, and in light of all that I have seen, a quote came to my mind from a friend of mine. Speaking of the Jewish people he said, “The Jews are just like everyone else, just a little bit more.” What I think this quote is getting across in a humorous way, is actually what God spoke in the first verse that I quoted above in which God calls His people His “firstborn”. In ancient culture, to be “firstborn” in a family denoted more than simple birth order, it actually represented a status, or a hierarchy within the family.

Since the ancient world was patriarchal, the firstborn son was expected to become the new patriarch of the family once their father died. This means that they were expected to carry on the ideals of their father, and to take the lion's share of the inheritance. To put this point more simply, even though all the sons of a particular family would be loved by the father and cared for by him, the firstborn had *pre-eminence* amongst his siblings.

That is in essence what God is getting across to Pharaoh when He calls Israel His “firstborn”. He is not denying being the Father of all nations, we all know that our God is the God of the universe, and that it was His love for the world that caused Him to give His only Son for us that *whosoever* would believe in Him could have everlasting life. In saying this He was merely showing Pharaoh the status that Israel had before Him.

So for the rest of this paper we will be unpacking all the ways that Israel is the firstborn. By doing this we will hopefully understand the world's incessant obsession with this small minority of people, but we will also understand our own relationship with God better, and even understand God's eventual plan for the Jews and the rest of the world. I will be doing this from my own theological convictions that the church *has not* replaced Israel, but I believe that what I am about to say shouldn't be that controversial even for Christians who think differently than me.

First to Know God

"Let all the nations be gathered together, And let the people be assembled. Who among them can declare this, And show us former things? Let them bring out their witnesses, that they may be justified; Or let them hear and say, 'It is truth.' 'You are My witnesses,' says the LORD, 'And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me.'"

-Isaiah 43:9-10

The primary meaning of Israel's "elect" status before God is that they were the first ones to really know God. In the above passage God is emphatic with His people that they have been chosen by God to be His witnesses to the nations that He alone is God of the whole universe. We are taught in various passages of the Bible, that the other nations were exposed to certain aspects of God that can be found in truth, goodness, and beauty, they did not receive a personal revelation of God in the same way that the Israelites did:

"And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, 'so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us...'"

-Acts 17:26-27

The Apostle Paul tells the pagans on Mars Hill that God has presided over the nations, but He only gave them enough knowledge of Himself that they might "grope for Him and find Him..." He didn't reveal Himself directly to them in a way that they could actually *know* Him the way that the Jews did. An example I like to use has to do with artistic creation. As a fan of an artist I can get to know them *through* their art. So for instance, if I watch enough Christopher Nolan movies I can begin to understand his "voice". I can almost "hear" his dialect through his movie scripts, I can start to understand how he

views the world, and I can even watch interviews of him and see how he speaks and acts on an individual level.

But all of this is merely knowledge of a man, it isn't the same as knowing him. The only people who really *know* him are the ones who have a relationship with him. This is the distinction. Our pagan ancestors merely knew *about* God through His creation. But some of what they "knew" was actually wrong, and none of this knowledge, no matter how accurate, actually gave them the ability to know Him personally. It was only the Jews who were given that privilege, for reasons that I won't delve into right now. But this also meant that God dwelt with the nation of Israel. His divine presence actually dwelt within the Jewish temple in Israel.

That means that this privilege also gave them a responsibility, to act as witnesses to the world of this divine revelation and to show everyone His divine glory. That if one of our ancestors wanted to know God during the Old Testament, they would have to be taught about God through the Jewish people and they would only be able to draw near to God in the physical city of Jerusalem through the Old Testament ordinances that would allow them to draw near to the Holy of Holies in the temple of God. And we can see in the Old Testament that this was always God's desire for His people:

"The inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, 'Let us continue to go and pray before the LORD, And seek the LORD of hosts. I myself will go also.' Yes, many peoples and strong nations Shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, And to pray before the LORD." "Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." ' "

-Zechariah 8:21-23

And when God came to this earth, He came to His people in the form of a Jewish man, namely the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was born in Israel, lived His whole life in Israel, and, almost exclusively, revealed Himself to the Jewish people. As the apostle Peter explains this to the Jews after His Resurrection:

"You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' "To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities."

-Acts 3:25-26

While Israel is the firstborn, this is one of the main things that the modern church has been grafted into. Through the Jewish Messiah, and Jewish apostles, knowledge of the true and living God has been shown to us and we now know God. And just like the Jews, we are now commissioned by God to be His witnesses to the whole world:

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.”

-Matthew 28:18-19

First to Receive Mercy

“I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by their arms; But they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, With bands of love, And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them.”

-Hosea 11:3-4

Along with knowing God, Israel was the first nation to experience the forgiveness and mercy of God. While our ancestors were able to understand the barest shadow of God’s mercy through His creation, the people of Israel were privileged to actually experience the forgiveness and kindness of God in a personal relationship with Him.

This truth carries two basic ideas with it. The first is that, through the Jewish rituals given to them by God, a person could actually be forgiven by God and be set free from God’s judgement. What the Jews were taught is that the God of the universe is an all Holy God. Meaning, among other things, that unlike the Pagan deities, their God was absolutely perfect, with no defects or idiosyncrasies to His nature. And it was from this perfect nature that He would judge mankind. But the mercy of God taught His people how to show their contrition before Him in a way that He would respond to, that they might be truly forgiven and made right with Him:

“If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.”

-Psalm 130:3-4

Secondly, this means that the nation of Israel, being God’s firstborn, received a level of mercy and kindness from God that the other nations didn’t have. Remember that in the ancient world, the firstborn son was supposed to carry on the legacy of the father. As such, the firstborn son would be, in some ways, subject to harsher judgement, but in

other ways, more lenient punishment. The older son would usually be held to a much higher standard of behavior, but he also would almost certainly never be cut off from his inheritance, since he was expected culturally to carry on in the place of his father.

This is more or less what we see in the Old Testament. Since Israel received the moral laws of God directly, they were held to a much higher standard of behavior than the other nations. God also seems to judge His people much faster and more directly than He does other nations:

“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son in whom he delights.”

-Proverbs 3:11-12

Much of the Old Testament is God “chastening” His people and drawing them back to Himself. But, even though He judges His people more harshly, He also has more mercy towards them. For other nations, God allows them to be wiped out when they stray too far, but the nation of Israel, He maintains even in the midst of their worst rebellions. Take the following passage from the prophet Jeremiah that he speaks when Israel is in one of its worst states of apostasy, to the point where Jeremiah says that they are acting even *worse* than the surrounding pagan nations. But even though God delivers a pretty heavy judgement towards them, He also says this:

“Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for a light by day, The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, Who disturbs the sea, And its waves roar (The LORD of hosts is His name): “If those ordinances depart From before Me, says the LORD, Then the seed of Israel shall also cease From being a nation before Me forever.” Thus says the LORD: “If heaven above 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”

-Jeremiah 31:35-37

Even in the midst of His judgement, He points to cosmic certainty to ground His people in His love and protection. This is an aside, but verses like this are also why people like me are fairly convinced that God has not cast aside the Jewish people, in spite of their current apostasy and rejection of His Son. And it is a pretty incredible miracle that the Jewish people have maintained their identity as Jews and have even come back to their land after two thousand years of exile. This shows the beautiful mercy of our God that the Jews were the first to experience, and as the church, we now have the ability to experience it as well:

“This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”

-2 Timothy 2:11-13

This promise to the individual for God's mercy is a beautiful thing. While God will discipline His children, He will not disown us. His desire and call, even in harsh discipline and rebuke, is for us to repent and come back to Him. Just as this truth applied to the individual Jew as well as the nation, it applies to the church itself as well as the individual Christian:

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

-Matthew 16:18

The church has gone through many things for the last two thousand years. Whole Christian nations have been conquered, churches have risen and fallen, and even whole sections of Christianity have fallen prey to various false teachings and doctrines. But in all of this, the Church, that is the universal gathering of believers in Christ, has remained strong, and it will continue to remain until the return of Christ. But, lest we believe that the church's privilege in some way invalidates the Jews, Paul tells us:

“What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.”

Romans 3:1-2

We must always remember that the church's knowledge of God, and the mercy that we enjoy from Him, has come to us *through* the Jews, not apart from them.

First in Blessing

“Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—“blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

-Genesis 22:15-18

This is where things get a little more controversial. After Abraham offers Isaac to God, God's covenant with him is solidified in this act of obedience and his faith is made perfect in his works. Part of the covenant, or pact, that Abraham has with God is this notion of being blessed, or favored by God. This blessing has a lot to do with the previous points we have already made. Abraham's seed are a blessing to the world since they are messengers of His glory and morality. But also since they have received the special mercy of God, the nations of the world are called to recognize this blessing and participate with it.

Later on in the book of Numbers we have a pagan king in outside the promised land who tries to curse the nation of Israel through the prophet Balaam and this idea is reiterated:

"God brings him out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox; He shall consume the nations, his enemies; He shall break their bones And pierce them with his arrows. 'He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him?' 'Blessed is he who blesses you, And cursed is he who curses you.'"

-Numbers 24:8-9

The prophet declares that since the nation of Israel has the blessing of God, the nations are called, uniquely, to participate with this blessing. To go against it actually incurs the wrath of God in a way that is untrue for the surrounding nations. While God does seem to care about the character of a given culture, which included how they conducted warfare, He doesn't seem to mind nations conquering one another. Israel on the other hand has an interesting protection around them:

"For thus says the LORD of hosts: 'He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches the apple of His eye. 'For surely I will shake My hand against them, and they shall become spoil for their servants. Then you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent Me.'"

-Zechariah 2:8-9

This doesn't mean that Israel's blessed status means that they can do no wrong, or that God is *always* opposed to other nations attacking or conquering His people, but this only seems to happen when His people begin to fall away from God and practice idolatry. And even when God allows this, He does judge the nations in *how* they conduct themselves in conquering Israel.

This means that the nations, and people groups, who chose to bless the people of Israel are tapping into that blessing. In other words, God is pleased with people in treating His

firstborn well, in much the same way an earthly father would be pleased if someone was kind to his own sons.

But the inverse is true. When people mistreat the people of God, as we saw in the above passage, God is upset with those nations and He judges them in accordance with this. As I said before though, this promise of blessing is not to the exclusion of all other people groups. Because God loves the world, He does desire for us to treat one another with respect and kindness. This is why God tells His people to treat their neighbors well:

“And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. ‘The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.’”
-Leviticus 19:33-34

It was this verse that Christ summarizes in the famous “Golden Rule” “Treat others just as you would want them to treat you.” (Luke 6:31). What does this mean? The Jews as God’s firstborn become a symbol, an example for how to treat others. That as we witness God’s divine blessing and care for His people, that we learn what it means to treat others. We will talk more about this when we talk about the Jews as the firstborn among strangers, but this blessing for the stranger is what teaches us to love as God loves.

So while there is a blessing in blessing all peoples, it is the Jews who represent the firstborn in this blessing. And once again, God’s blessing upon His people doesn’t mean that they are always right or that we must encourage them in all things. God is the first to call out the depravity of His people, and the first to correct their errors. The difference is that God doesn’t correct His people to destroy them, but to love them and help them seek the true blessing that comes from honoring God and inviting Him into the deepest recesses of our life.

It is this blessing that the church is now grafted into:

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”
-Galatians 6:10

Notice that Paul exhorts us to “do good to all” but then adds “especially to those who are of the household of faith.” So the “blessedness” that the church is grafted into makes it, in some ways, more preferable to bless members of the Christian community,

but this blessing flows out to all people. To put it another way, just as the justice of God starts with His people and flows out to the world, so does the blessing of God.

This means that Christians from the time of the apostles to now have asked themselves how they can bless the Jewish people? But this desire is never detached from their desire to bless the world, but it flows from a desire to bless the Jewish people. I truly believe that this desire is what receives a blessing from God and it also looks very different depending on the time we live in and our ability to help. To use one, extreme, example let's take a quote from Corrie Ten Boom, a woman who, along with her family, hid Jews during the Holocaust:

“That was all. Nothing had changed. Mrs. Heemstra continued with her recipe for stretching the tea ration with rose leaves. And yet everything was changed. For in that instant, reality broke through the numbness that had grown in me since the invasion. At any minute there might be a rap on this door. These children, this mother and father, might be ordered to the back of a truck. Dr. Heemstra came back to the living room and the conversation rambled on. But under the words, a prayer was forming in my heart. Lord Jesus, I offer myself for Your people. In any way. Any place. Any time. And then an extraordinary thing happened. Even as I prayed, that waking dream passed again before my eyes. I saw again those four black horses and the Grote Markt. As I had on the night of the invasion, I scanned the passengers drawn so unwillingly behind them. Father, Betsie, Willem, myself—leaving Haarlem, leaving all that was sure and safe—going where?”

-Corrie Ten Boom - “The Hiding Place”

Corrie didn't know what God was going to call her family to do, she only felt a conviction to help no matter what. After she does this, God shows her the price of this decision, all of Corrie's family were eventually found, and with the exception of her, died in the same concentration camps that they risked their lives to save the Jews from. So where was their blessing?

Their blessing was not material, but it was spiritual. If you read the account of Corrie in her book, you will see that through their decision to risk everything for the Jews, it complimented and grew the deep love that they had for all people. Corrie and her sister were able to find the hope and comfort of God even in the depths of the camp, and even after the war, Corrie devoted herself to helping people recover from the terrors of the war to to forgive the evil people who perpetrated it. And that is why, to this day, Christians and Jews read the story of the Boom family and consider them blessed.

First to Reject God

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! “See! Your house is left to you desolate; “for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’”

-Matthew 23:37-39

Since Israel was the first nation to worship God, they are also the first nation to reject God. Our pagan ancestors would, at times, struggle with their gods and even adopt foreign gods in their worship. But, because these gods were mere shadows and perversions of the true and living God, their apostasy was not as cataclysmic as the Jews. When the Jews fell away in their faith, they were not denying some random principality, they were directly rebelling against the God of the whole universe.

This happened multiple times within Israel’s history. Usually when the nation fell into apostasy, they would have multiple, righteous members of their population who would rise up and rebuke the nation, and many of these men were prophets sent by God to lead the nation into repentance. Some of these prophets were successful, like Elijah and Isaiah, but for others, the nation's apostasy was so severe that they persecuted and even murdered these prophets. These would be men like Jeremiah and John the Baptist. But, the worst apostasy that the nation had was during the first century when they rejected Jesus and the ruling class had Him executed. As Peter explains to the Jews on the Feast of Pentecost, after Jesus’ resurrection:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—“Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; “whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.”

-Acts 2:22-24

But, in response to this teaching, many Jews received Jesus as their Messiah and received forgiveness and blessing through God’s appointed Messiah. As Paul teaches us:

“I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom

He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying, "LORD, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"? But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace."

-Romans 11:1-5

No matter how severe the apostasy of God's people might be, there will always be a "remnant" who are faithful to God and His purposes. But this remnant will also be persecuted by the Jews who are rebelling against God. And this is what we see in the first century. Unfortunately, the first persecutors of the Church were not the Romans, but Jews. But this wasn't really Jews persecuting Gentiles, this was Jews persecuting their fellow Jews who put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Christ.

But notice Jesus' attitude towards this apostasy, even knowing that the Jews would turn on Him and sentence Him to death, and that this animosity would spread to His friends and disciples. He isn't wrathful or indignant, He is instead mournful and distraught. This isn't Jesus casting off His people, it is Jesus mourning over the fate of His people. Because, again, to deny God is to rebel against the very ground of truth and being. No nation who rebels against God can possibly stand for very long. And unfortunately this is what happens to the Jews.

The first time this happened was when the northern ten tribes of Israel fell away and they were conquered by the Assyrians and exiled from the land. This happened again when the Babylonian empire conquered the remaining southern two tribes and they exiled them from the land. From that moment on, the Jews never really possessed their own land. Even when they returned to Israel, a couple centuries before the birth of Christ, they were under the governance of various empires, from the Persian empire, to the Greek, and finally to the Roman.

But a few decades after the death of Christ, the Jews rebelled against the Roman empire. However, they didn't do this as a strong, faithful group of people who were rallying under the banner of God. They did this as a fractious society who had, largely, rejected their God and were seeking liberty for varying interests. This rebellion unfortunately ended in disaster with the Romans massacring countless Jews in Jerusalem and exiling them from the land once again. As the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer put this point:

“The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the “chosen people,” which hung the Redeemer of the world on the cross, must endure the curse of its action in long drawn-out suffering. “The Jews are the most miserable people on earth. They are plagued everywhere, and scattered about all countries, having no certain resting place” (Luther, Table Talk).”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - “The Church and the Jewish Question”

I want to make a quick point, Bonhoeffer is not saying what many anti-semitic pastors have said throughout church history, that the Jews *deserve* their fate on the earth and that it is even good for the church to *participate* in the persecution of the Jews. Bonhoeffer was actually one of the few German pastors who rebelled against Hitler and the Nazi atrocities against the Jews. He is merely stating a fact that the *consequence* of the Jews falling away from God has been their exile from their own land (we will talk more about anti-semitism in a future chapter).

And this sets up for us a really disturbing pattern, to rebel against God is also to rebel against His image:

“If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”

-1 John 4:20

The Jews who rejected Christ began to despise their fellow Jews who had received their true Messiah. Just as we talked about the blessing for those who bless the people of God and the curse for those who curse the people of God, the Jews turned against their own and persecuted the most faithful among themselves. This then moved towards terrible strife amongst their own communities. It is said that when the Roman emperor who conquered Jerusalem arrived he decided to wait outside the city instead of fighting them. Because, he said that if he fought them they might unify against him, but if he waited they would do worse to themselves than what he could ever do to them.

Before my next point I want to be clear, the Covenant that God made with His people during the time of Moses can no longer redeem those who follow it. The proof of this is that the Temple was destroyed. That system has fallen away because God has made a New Covenant with His people through Jesus Christ. That being said, the faithfulness of the Jews towards the Covenant that they have received has been fairly spotty throughout the centuries.

While the Jews have widely held to the customs and the traditions of their past, true faith has been rare. The reason why I bring this up is not to say that the Jews could be

saved through the Old Covenant, but only to show that their apostasy is so severe that they not only rejected their Messiah, but they have widely fallen away from the previous Covenant. But we must take note, that Paul gives a severe warning to us Gentile believers in Romans 11:

“For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.”

-Romans 11:21-22

We will talk more on this in a bit, but Paul's warning is especially important today. Just because Israel, being our older brother, was the first nation to fall away from God, the gentile nations who converted to Christianity are equally susceptible to apostasy, and our falling away will mirror the Israeli falling away.

Inspiring Our Brother to Jealousy

“I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.”

-Romans 11:11

It is from this that we can understand one of the important facets of the Church. Because God has not cast off His people but desires to bring them back to Him, He even uses the Church to accomplish that purpose. What's supposed to happen is that the Church is supposed to demonstrate to the Jews their error. That in the way we love each other and the world, we would reveal to the Jewish people the truth of Jesus as the Messiah.

That through this one Jew, the truth of God has been made known to the Gentile nations. To put it another way, the main mission that God gave to His people in choosing them was accomplished through the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jews and the Gentiles

“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of

commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.”

-Ephesians 2:11-18

However, What we see in the first century is that the Jewish people had widely turned away from that mission. This is understandable since the Gentile nations surrounding them had oppressed them for half a millenia, but this prejudice shows up whenever Jesus interacted with a non-Jew, and even appears when Peter receives the call to preach to the Gentiles.

In fact, we see that the apostle Paul, the main apostle to spread the gospel to Gentiles, was particularly hated by the corrupt Jewish leadership, not only because he preached Jesus as the Messiah, but also that he did this to the Gentile people.

“Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”

-Acts 21:27-28

Noticed that they are actively angry at Paul for teaching Gentiles the Law, and teaching them about the temple. Something that should have been beautiful to the Jews was an abomination to them. But this attitude was also present in the church. The Jews were skeptical about Gentiles entering the faith, and they were even more upset that these Gentiles were not required to give up their national identities and become Jewish. That is why the above passage from Ephesians is so poignant, Paul proclaims that Christ is our peace, who has brought the Jews and Gentiles together in a single body of believers and allowed for all of us to draw near to God. The Jews who are the firstborn nation of God now welcome younger siblings into this gathering of faithful people unto God. This is one of the facets of John's vision of heaven that he calls “New Jerusalem”

“And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it.”

-Revelation 21:24

But once again, just as the Jews fell away from God and lost their mission, so the church falls away from our mission and rebels against God. Like the Jews, we can study church history and see the same pattern. Patterns of revival and apostasy moving back and forth throughout the centuries. When the church is faithful to God, we are faithful to our mission. We invite the stranger into the gospel and we share the power of God in both word and deed.

When we fall away we persecute the faithful and close our doors to those on the outside. So, like our older brother, the church moves through seasons of apostasy, in these seasons it isn't as though we outwardly reject God or the gospel, but it is that these Christian nations become violent and oppressive towards others and we insist on doctrinal purity. What this means is that every believer who doesn't follow strict dogmas is persecuted and even executed. It is a sad truth, but there are large sections of Christianity in which the Church's worst enemy were fellow Christians.

In fact, in one period like this, the famous pastor John Bunyan, who wrote "Pilgrim's Progress", was put in prison, not by a pagan government, but a Christian one. And in that same novel, he represented the great persecutors of Christians as two great beasts, one he named "pagan" and the other he named "pope". We'll talk about this more later, but it is also during these times that the church stops ministering to those outside the church and begins forcing people to convert. Some of the prime targets of these forced conversions, persecutions, exiling, and even execution have been the Jewish people.

This is what Paul means when he warns the church against boasting over our Jewish older brother. The second we are tempted to judge the Jews for killing the prophets, or the Messiah, or their fellow Jews who converted to Christianity, we can look at our own history and see the exact same thing.

And on that point of killing their Messiah, God in human flesh, consider this quote from the atheist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche when he spoke about the German rejection of God:

"Where is God gone?" he called out. "I mean to tell you! We have killed him, — you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun?... How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knives, — who will wipe the blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals, what sacred games shall we

have to devise? Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?"

-Friedrich Nietzsche - "The Gay Science"

Notice the language of "murdering God." When a society rebels against their gods, they are rebelling against the highest point of orientation for the society and the very bedrock of their institutions, even when this rebellion is against pagan gods there is a high price and tremendous cataclysm, but to rebel against the true and living God? This is nothing short of anarchy, and to repair that wound requires us to assert our own will and power to the position of God.

When we think through the nations that have done this, from France to Germany, to Russia, this is precisely the pattern we see. They rebel against the highest and create systems of oppression and tyranny that dwarf all that came before it. Their leaders considered themselves gods and the people felt their wrath. And as we said before, and will elaborate on before, this wrath almost always begins with the Jews, and then emanates outwards to faithful Christians and then the rest of the world, all who are considered unworthy of the "divine" vision of the terrible tyrants. To put this point more simply, the Jews manifested their ultimate rebellion by rejecting and crucifying their Messiah, Christian nations have manifested their rebellion through persecuting the Jews and then their fellow countrymen.

To drive this point home, consider this quote by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. In the following quote, he comments on a time in the camp where the Nazi's hung a young boy and he had to watch him die in excruciating agony:

"He was still alive when I passed him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet extinguished. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "For God's sake, where is God?" And from within me, I heard a voice answer: "Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows ..."

-Elie Wiesel - "Night"

Elie is not saying that the boy was literally God, but he recognized the image of God upon this boy. When the Nazi's, some of whom claimed to be acting as Christians in these atrocities, turned against God and rebelled against His Word, manifested that belief by lashing out against their fellow men in the most brutal and demonic ways imaginable.

First Among Strangers

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.”

Jeremiah 29:4-7

When Israel first went into captivity after they were conquered by Babylon, they entered into a state that Jews called the “diaspora”, or, the “dispersion”. They became a people without a homeland, and even when they came back to the land under king Cyrus in the sixth century B.C., they never really regained autonomy as a people group. And then in 70 A.D., the dispersion became virtually complete, meaning that virtually every Jew was sent away from Israel and forced to live in exile.

However, unlike most exiles, they retained the knowledge of their home. Even secular Jews maintained many of their traditions, much of their morality, their identity as a distinct people group, and a firm desire to return home to Israel. During every wedding, Jews smash a glass to remember the destruction of the temple and they quote from Psalm 137:5-6 “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you,

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy.” And after every Passover Seder, the people would say: “Next year in Jerusalem.”

By doing these things for the past two thousand years the Jews have been established as a permanent minority, “stranger” wherever they dwell. Biblically, there is a heavy onus on societies to treat the stranger among them with respect.

“And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. ‘The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

-Leviticus 19:33-34

The “stranger” in the Bible is a person who doesn’t share in the national, or religious identity of the Jewish people. God tells His people to treat the stranger with respect, because Egypt failed to do this when they enslaved the Israelites. The reason why God is saying this is because the stranger is a vulnerable part of the population. They are

necessarily a minority, they have no strong political power, and because they are away from their home, they have no larger community to protect them.

While the Bible does place certain restrictions on what the stranger can do within the nation, the Bible is absolutely clear that the laws of hospitality apply just as much to the stranger as their fellow Jews. Jesus in the New Testament reiterates this point in His famous parable of the “Good Samaritan”. After giving this famous teaching Jesus says:

“So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” And he said, “He who showed mercy on him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

-Luke 10:36-37

The Samaritan was a stranger to the Jew in the story, and yet he showed him kindness and respect by caring for him when he was wounded and vulnerable. This is the principle. This is why, Biblically, the Bible ties this type of hospitality into caring for the poor, the orphan, and the widow. These are people without power or prestige and the Bible is telling us that we should treat these people with respect and dignity and to never take advantage of their vulnerability.

In the case of the Jewish people, there is another element that we should examine. Because even though the Jews have been vulnerable in the societies that they have dwelt in, they have also been successful wherever they go. So even though they are relatively vulnerable, they are also relatively wealthy and powerful. The way that the Jews have been able to do this is by taking on a type of “mediating” role within the society. Because the Jews have been outside the normal societal hierarchy, they have been used by Lords and Kings to be masters of “coin” within a given community. This means collecting taxes, but it also means representing what we would call the “merchant class”.

The economist Thomas Sowell makes this point about the effect of the Jews occupying this status in European communities:

“On the eve of the First World War, for example, Jews were 60 percent of all the merchants in Hungary, despite being only 6 percent of the population. By 1920, they were also half of all lawyers and three-fifths of all doctors. On the eve of Hitler’s coming to power in Germany, Jews owned 60 percent of wholesale and retail clothing businesses in the country. In the late nineteenth century, Jews owned 80 percent of all retail clothing stores in New York City and 90 percent of the wholesale clothing trade.”

-Thomas Sowell - “Black Rednecks and White Liberals”

But again, even though the Jews had this economic power, they were still a minority within the culture and had no real institutional power or intrinsic protection. Instead this protection was provided by the ones who used them as “middle men”, but this status didn’t always hold. As jealousy turned to resentment, and the tide of the country tended to turn, those who defended the Jews tended to sell them out for their own benefit:

“Because the middleman is essential to the overlords, these rulers may protect him when necessary from overt violence. On the other hand, during periods when resentments reach the point where the governing powers themselves are at some risk, nothing is easier than to throw the middleman minority to the wolves and not only withdraw protection but even incite the mobs in order to direct their anger away from the overlords.”

-Thomas Sowell - “Black Rednecks and White Liberals”

I want to be clear, this is not meant to be an explanation as to *why* the Jews have been such victims of hatred, I will give a more full explanation in a bit. This is merely to show the vulnerable position that Jews have historically been in, regardless of their relative wealth and prosperity.

This also means that the precarious position that the Jews hold within a given community makes it hard for the community to decide what to do with them. They think that it would be far easier to try to assimilate them or convert them to Christianity, but when the Jews refuse the introduction, and are stalwart against persecution, what do you do?

Preeminent in Being Hated

“Since the fourth century after Christ there have been three anti-Jewish policies: [forced] conversion, expulsion, annihilation. The second appeared as an alternative to the first, and the third emerged as an alternative to the second.... The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live.”

-Raul Hilberg

The statement that Raul Hilberg, a scholar on the Holocaust, is articulating is what the Germans called “the Jewish question”. What do you do with a minority population, who refuses to bow to our God, only assimilates to a point, and who, usually, ends up very successful in the population? The first three solutions have been tried, and so Hitler came up with his “final solution” to deal with the Jews once and for all.

While we could go into the history of the Holocaust, or the pogroms, or the Inquisition, or any of the other atrocities committed against Jewish communities by the Christian west, or we could talk about Jewish persecution in the Middle East from the Muslims, or the anti-semitism in the eastern Asia, but the point becomes redundant and tedious. The point is obvious, no matter where you go in the world, and no matter what time period in history, the Jews seem to be on the back end of various atrocities and persecutions against them. So in this way, what Hitler did to the Jews in the Holocaust was not new in principle, but it was new in its scale.

But the obvious question is why is this persecution done to the Jews? While there are many physical answers to this question, the Jews are a convenient scapegoat, they occupy that “middle man” status that we talked about previously, they are a racial minority, they are an un-assimilatable minority, they are religiously opposed to the nations that they dwell, and so on and so forth. All of these reasons I think describe a part of the phenomenon, but there seems to be something missing in all of them. In fact, in order to come to terms with the universal persecution of the Jews, I think we would have to conclude that there is something special about the Jewish people that goes beyond their beliefs, their economic status, and their ethnic make-up. The fact of the matter is that the Jews are either uniquely evil, or they have some spiritual uniqueness to them that we can't fully quantify in a material sense.

As to the claim that perhaps the Jews are uniquely evil, this has actually been the essential claim of most anti-semitic movements throughout the world. In the Christian world this began very early on, but was articulated by men like Gregory of Nyssa in some of the earliest years of Christianity:

“Murderers of the Lord, killers of the prophets, enemies and slanderers of God; violators of the law, adversaries of grace, aliens to the faith of their fathers, advocates of the devil, progeny of poison snakes.... whose minds are held in darkness, filled with the anger of the Pharisees, a Sanhedrin of satans. Criminals, degenerates....enemies of all that is decent and beautiful....”

-Gregory of Nyssa

Notice that he points out that the Jews are “murderers of the Lord”, this idea was present from the earliest points in church history. That since the Jews killed the prophets of the Old Covenant, crucified Jesus, and were responsible for the death of the first martyrs of the church, they must be uniquely evil and therefore uniquely worthy of hatred. Even later in church history when men like Martin Luther tried to reverse the

rabid anti-semitism in the church, towards the end of his life, Luther, whether under the influence of madness or evil, said the following:

“What shall we Christians do with this damned, rejected race of Jews?... First, their synagogues should be set on fire.... Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed.... Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer-books and Talmuds.... Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more.... Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews.... Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury [charging interest on loans].... Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the ax, the hoe, the spade, the distaff, and spindle, and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses.... We ought to drive the rascally lazy bones out of our system.... Therefore away with them.... To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden—the Jews.”

-Martin Luther

Unfortunately these words from Luther that were largely forgotten over the centuries were found and used to great effect by the Nazi's when they took over Germany. But this is the claim of all those who uniquely hate the Jews, that they, in some way, deserve hatred because of their unique evil.

As we have said before though, this simply isn't true. The reason why the Jews were responsible for these things, is because they had been chosen by God to be the first to know Him. If any other nation was chosen by God, they would have been guilty of exactly the same things. The proof of that is to look at the horrible atrocities that Christians have perpetrated against themselves and others throughout the last two millennia. Even though we have the gospel and the Holy Spirit, we are equally capable of the exact same types of sins that the Jews were guilty of. And the only reason why we won't crucify Christ as they did is because He was only incarnated once.

So that leaves us with really only one other option, the Jews must be unique in a spiritual sense:

“Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its

mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

-Revelation 12:13-17

The dragon, Satan, uniquely hates the Jews because they gave birth to “the male Child”, namely, Christ. Satan, being a sore loser, has aimed a large amount of hatred and animosity towards the Jewish people because of that. But we shouldn’t be mistaken here. Satan doesn’t *only* hate the Jews, he hates God and therefore all those who bear God’s image. It is just that the Jews, being God’s firstborn, are in some ways a clearer version of that image and therefore are a unique target for his animus. Dr. Michael Brown put this point this way:

“No, it is not simply Christianity, or the need to find a scapegoat, or negative aspects of Jewish personality, or the pattern of Jewish success, or the uniqueness of Judaism, or divine chastisement that is wholly responsible for anti-Semitism. None of these theories totally works, although there is some truth in each one of them. In reality, there is only one way to explain anti-Semitism: The devil hates the Jews, and his demented nature is revealed in his treatment of the Jewish people. While many other nations and groups have felt the fury of his wrath, none have felt it so often, so consistently, and so powerfully as have the Jews.”

-Dr. Michael Brown - “Our Hands Are Stained With Blood”

I love how he puts that “his demented nature is revealed in his treatment of the Jewish people.” It isn’t that the Jews draw out his demented nature, it is that they reveal it for what it is. His wrathful and vindictive nature towards mankind is always revealed in a persecution of some representation of God. Whether it is the pagan practice of burning babies alive, or the Muslim rape of nuns upon altars in the church, or the crazed shooter in Lancaster Pennsylvania in 2006 who specifically targeted young Amish students, or the persecution of the Jews, or the hatred of Christians, Satan’s nature of pure unvarnished wrath and bigotry is revealed in all these incidents. But as we are told by the apostle John, the Jews are uniquely targeted by his wrath because of the part they played in the redemption of mankind.

But this hatred for Jews never stays on the Jews. While the Nazi’s did uniquely target Jews, they also targeted the disabled, political dissidents, and all Christians who didn’t submit to Hitler. A German pastor named Martin Neimoller stood up to the Nazi’s too late and gave this infamous quote:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

We tend to forget that while the Nazi hatred for the Jews was on a larger scale than all other people, they were certainly not the only target of the Nazis and they weren't necessarily the first victims of the onslaught. This principle is simply the inverse of what we talked about before, that God will bless those who bless His people and curse those who curse His people. If, by blessing the stranger and the powerless and seeking to bless God's firstborn we enter into a door of blessing that extends to all people, to walk in the curse of God means to hate His image that is on the stranger, the fatherless, and yes the firstborn of His people, and that door of hatred and cursing will extend out to all other people.

God's Perfect Patience

“But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, And my Lord has forgotten me.’ ‘Can a woman forget her nursing child, And not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, Yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.’”

-Isaiah 49:14-16

But, in all our attempts to “fix” the Jewish problem we forget something important, they are God's people and He hasn't forgotten them. We will talk more about this at the end, but God has a plan for His people that corresponds to His plan for all people groups. The church is not supposed to be impatient with the will of God, but instead to trust His timing and merely extend a hand of charity and blessing to His people in patient anticipation of His timing and in hope that while the Jewish people at large won't find their Messiah, individual Jews will. And if we can learn to do that, we can learn a secret that the church has always struggled with:

“But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God...”

-Romans 2:2-5

As we have talked about throughout this paper, this doesn't mean that we treat the Jews differently than anyone else, but that God's firstborn can help us understand how to treat all people with dignity and patience. We tend to give up on people when we share the gospel with them, and to grow frustrated when our attempts to help them are rebuffed, or even met with venom and hatred. It is easy for us to turn bitter and vindictive towards others at times like this, and when we do this we forget the simple truth: *the goodness of God leads you to repentance.*"

God who was so patient in our salvation, and gave each of us so many opportunities to see His goodness and to turn to Him and away from our sin, we should give our fellow man that same level of patience and kindness. This doesn't mean shying away from the gospel, and it doesn't mean tolerating sin or depravity, there are practical ways to deal with these things. But it is to say that under normal circumstances we can wait patiently for the work of God in someone's life.

It is always possible that no matter how much we reach out to a person, that they will never respond, but that doesn't mean we give up on them. And the Jews can help us understand this truth. While he messed up this message at the end of his life, Martin Luther was completely right when he said:

"We would still show them the Christian doctrine and ask them to convert and accept the Lord whom they should by rights have honored before we did. . . . When they repent, leave their usury, and accept Christ, we would gladly regard them as our brothers."

What would be the alternative? To give people only a small amount of chances to find Christ, and if not to remove our grace and approach that same person with vitriol and hatred? To do this would not only subvert the gospel message, but it would actually associate God with our wrath in that person's eyes, which would then act as a barrier to their faith. Consider an extreme example of when Elie Wiesel was subject to the demonic wrath of the Nazi's:

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky. Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to

ashes. Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."

-Elie Wiesel - "Night"

But to bring balance to that point, we must remember that God in His infinite love and mercy can help someone overcome those extreme boundaries and find the truth of His love. I really appreciate how the French writer Francois Mauriac put this point when he spoke to a young boy who survived the Holocaust:

"And I, who believe that God is love, what answer was there to give my young interlocutor whose dark eyes still held the reflection of the angelic sadness that had appeared one day on the face of a hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak to him of that other Jew, this crucified brother who perhaps resembled him and whose cross conquered the world? Did I explain to him that what had been a stumbling block for his faith had become a cornerstone for mine? And that the connection between the cross and human suffering remains, in my view, the key to the unfathomable mystery in which the faith of his childhood was lost? And yet, Zion has risen up again out of the crematoria and the slaughterhouses. The Jewish nation has been resurrected from among its thousands of dead. It is they who have given it new life. We do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear. All is grace. If the Almighty is the Almighty, the last word for each of us belongs to Him. That is what I should have said to the Jewish child. But all I could do was embrace him and weep.

-Francois Mauriac - "Forward to 'Night'"

First to Return

"The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" So I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." Again He said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! 'Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. "I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD."'" So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. Also He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain,

that they may live.”’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ “Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. “Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. “I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,” says the LORD.’”

-Ezekiel 37:1-14

This prophecy in the Ezekiel is a perfect articulation of a prophecy concerning the people of God. That while they would become “dead” in every sense of the word, God would miraculously restore them on the last day. Many Christians throughout the church have interpreted this passage as a general principle of death and Resurrection. Here Christians have found hope of spiritual revival for their communities, repentance for a loved one, or even miraculous healing when all hope seemed lost. And while all these interpretations are valid, we must remember that it is first and foremost prophecy for our older brother, the Jews. As Charles Spurgeon put this point in his own sermon on this passage:

“It is only a similar one for the way in which God restores a nation is, practically, the way in which He restores an individual. The way in which Israel shall be saved is the same by which any one individual sinner shall be saved. It is not, however, the one case which the Prophet is aiming at. He is looking at the vast mass of cases—the multitudes of instances to be found among the Jewish people of gracious quickening and holy resurrection.”

-Charles Spurgeon - “The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews” preached in 1864

Even though this prophecy is old, it has never been fulfilled. As we have spoken about, while Israel came back to the land after the time of Ezekiel, they never had the type of “resurrection” that Ezekiel foresees. This convinced Spurgeon, almost a hundred years before Israel became a nation, that this would have to be fulfilled in a literal sense:

“First, THERE IS TO BE A POLITICAL RESTORATION OF THE JEWS. Israel is now blotted out from the map of nations. Her sons are scattered far and wide. Her daughters mourn beside all the rivers of the earth. Her sacred song is hushed—no king reigns in Jerusalem! She brings forth no governors among her tribes. But she is to be restored!

She is to be restored "as from the dead." When her own sons have given up all hope of her, then is God to appear for her. She is to be reorganized—her scattered bones are to be brought together. There will be a native government again. There will again be the form of a political body. A State shall be incorporated and a king shall reign. Israel has now become alienated from her own land. Her sons, though they can never forget the sacred dust of Palestine, yet die at a hopeless distance from her consecrated shores... And they are also to be reunited. There shall not be two, nor ten, nor twelve, but one—one Israel praising one God—serving one king and that one King the Son of David, the descended Messiah! They are to have a national prosperity which shall make them famous..."

-Charles Spurgeon - "The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews"

But he takes pains to show us that this restoration will not be merely material, which we are currently witnessing, but also spiritual. Spurgeon, anticipating push back follows up this point by saying this:

"How can these things be? How can the Jews be converted to Christ? How can they be made into a nation? Truly the case is quite as hopeless as that of the bones in the valley! How shall they cease from worldliness or renounce their constant pursuit of riches? How shall they be weaned from their bigoted attachment to their Talmudic traditions? How shall they be lifted up out of that hardness of heart which makes them hate the Messiah of Nazareth, their Lord and King? How can these things be?" The Prophet does not say it cannot be. His unbelief is not so great as that, but at the same time he scarcely ventures to think that it can ever be possible. He very wisely, however, puts back the question upon his God—"O Lord God, You know." Now some of you are very expectant about this tonight and you are expecting to see the Jews converted very soon, perhaps in a month or two. I wish you may see it as soon as your desires would date it. Others of us are not as optimistic and take a more gloomy view of a long future of woes. Well, let us both together come before God tonight and say, "O Lord God, You know. And if You know it, Lord, we will be content to leave the secret with You! Only tell us what You would have us do. We ask not food for speculation, but we do ask for work. We ask for something by which we may practically show that we really do love the Jew and that we would bring him to Christ."

-Charles Spurgeon - "The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews"

Much of this we have already spoken of, but why is the return of the Jews so important, and what does it mean for the rest of the world? A good way to think of this is that the Jews were the first of God's people to walk away from him, but the Christian west has followed suit. We have forsaken the God who gave us our identity, our values, our laws, and our institutions. This is another strange experience that I had in Poland and Israel.

As beautiful as Poland was, its beauty is that of a ruin not a substantial civilization. The west has been dying for some time. Europe is a gorgeous mausoleum, a beautiful testament to the ruins of a truly great culture that rejected God and is now devouring itself. And as America falls into our own apostasy and continues down the path that Israel and Europe took before us, we are staring down the barrel of a bleak and seemingly hopeless future, which is why we are all so pessimistic about current events.

But when I went to Israel, it was a different experience. In many ways, Israel looks similar, the main draw to Israel is to see the remnants of the past. And yet the main difference is that it is coming back to life. This makes us jealous. We who have rejected our right to national identity and religious cohesion are jealous of Israel who is a state with an ethnic and religious identity that they are proud of and are willing to defend.

And this national pride is turning into a religious revival. When I went to the western wall, the part of the wall to the temple mount that is nearest to where the temple used to rest before it was destroyed by the Romans, and “replaced” by the Muslims, I saw the Jews praying for a resurrection of their faith. This wasn’t the same type of worship that I saw in these “dead” churches that are memorial stones of the past. This was a place that was coming back to life with exultant praise to God and prayers for a restoration of something that they lost.

Now I know that what the Jews are seeking here is not Jesus, but a return to their old system. But I would point out that this is a step in the right direction. The Jews are coming from total spiritual deadness. Israel has been a secular nation with all the faith of a modern European nation like France or England. But something is happening, something is changing. This is different from a Christian revival, this is dry bones coming back to life, this is literally life from the dead. And we know that, just as Israel was the first to walk away from God, they will be the first to return, and their return will lead us all back to God:

“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: “The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.” Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience, even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also

may obtain mercy. For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen."

-Romans 11:25-36

"For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"

-Romans 11:15

Paul is clear, and he is lining up with the prophecy of Ezekiel. At some point *after* the ministry of Paul, the nation of Israel will convert to Christ en masse, and this conversion will be "life from the dead". Meaning that the miracle of the gospel going out to the gentiles as a result of their rejection will be dwarfed by the miracle that God will bring about when His people finally come home to knowing Him. This is why Jerusalem is so important in the Bible. It is the recapitulation of Eden, it is the ultimate picture of a home that has been long lost, and it is the picture of the fullness of redemption and unity with God and our fellow man. It is for this reason that our salvation was purchased in Jerusalem, and that our Lord will return to Jerusalem.

But as I have said before, we don't know what God's timing will be, and how He will accomplish this. As Spurgeon said, it isn't for us to figure out the mysteries of God's eternal plan, but to say: *"O Lord God, You know. And if You know it, Lord, we will be content to leave the secret with You! Only tell us what You would have us do. We ask not food for speculation, but we do ask for work. We ask for something by which we may practically show that we really do love the Jew and that we would bring him to Christ."*

"But the history of suffering of this people that God loved and punished will end in the final homecoming of the people Israel to its God. And this homecoming will take place in Israel's conversion to Christ. "When the hour comes when this people, humbled and repentant, lets go of the sins of its fathers, to which it has been clinging with terrible obstinacy to this day, and begs for the blood of the Crucified One to come down to reconcile them, the world will be astonished at the wonders God has wrought! Has wrought for this people! And the scoffing Philistines will be just so much filth in the street and dry straw on the rooftops. Then God will gather this people together out of all nations and bring it back to Canaan. O Israel, who is your equal? Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord!" (Menken, 1795). The conversion of Israel is to be the end of its

people's sufferings. From this perspective, the Christian church trembles at the sight of the people Israel's history, as God's own free, terrible way with God's own people."

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer - "The Church and the Jewish Question"