

God's Chosen People

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Introduction.

- A. Just last week, we were talking about trying to reach our non-Christian family members with the gospel, and this is something that we need to try with non-believers and members of the denominational world alike. At least to those who have never tried it, it might seem like teaching a deceived believer the truth might be the easier of the two tasks. After all, at least people like that acknowledge Jesus as Lord.
- B. In reality, though, dealing with friends and relatives who have mistaken ideas about the Bible poses its own challenges. Before we can teach them the truth, we need to tear down the decades' worth of error they've been taught, and that process can be a laborious one. In fact, that's where this sermon is coming from tonight. Some of you came to me wanting to know what to say to relatives who accept premillennialism.
- C. This false doctrine of premillennialism is one that we commonly encounter in other believers today. It is the idea that before the day of judgment, Christ will return to the earth to reign for a thousand years, along with all the other ideas that support that one. One of the primary tenets of this doctrine is the idea that at some point in the future, the entire physical nation of Israel is going to accept Jesus and be saved because they are the chosen people that God has really cared about and wanted all along. In the political realm, this mistaken idea has actually influenced US policy in the Middle East for decades, but in the spiritual realm, its consequences are even more profound. It minimizes the current importance of Christ, the significance of His church, and even the centrality of our own salvation. We need to know the truth about this, and we need to be able to teach those around us who are in error. Let's look, then, at the Bible take on God's chosen people.

I. Promise.

- A. This examination needs to begin with a look at the promise that God made to one man, Abraham. This promise first appears in Genesis 12:1-2. It's one of what we typically call the three promises made to Abraham, and in it, God tells this otherwise undistinguished man in an undistinguished city in modern-day Iraq that an entire nation is going to come from him. In reliance on this promise, Abraham picks up and moves about a thousand miles to Palestine, where he and his descendants for three generations live as wanderers in the land God has given to them. Although they have the promise from God that they will become a nation, in reality, they are just a few people, surrounded by the real nations of the Canaanites. Then, as a result of God working behind the scenes, they move to Egypt and grow from 70 people to hundreds of thousands.
- B. Fast-forward four hundred years, and we see God bring this new people up from the land of Egypt with, as the Scripture says, an outstretched arm and a mighty hand. However, they are not yet a nation, and they are not yet God's nation. Both of those things happen during the making of the covenant on Mount Sinai. We see God describe the results of this encounter in Deuteronomy 7:6-8. At first blush, this seems like a very strange idea. After all, God was the Creator of all men, not just of the children of Israel. Why, then, would He choose one people to be His possession? As God makes clear, He considers this the necessary fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and his descendants. Because God has carried out that promise by redeeming the Israelites when they could not save themselves, they have passed into God's ownership. They're God's possession now, and that means that God can tell them what to do. He makes clear that He expects them to be a holy people, a nation devoted to the Lord and to doing His will. It is for this that He has chosen them.
- C. As a result of being God's chosen people, though, the Israelites have a number of rights that the nations around them do not. Just as God made a promise to Abraham, so too He makes a promise to them. As long as they remain faithful, God will provide physically for them. They will be allowed to remain in the land that God had promised to their forefathers, and God will defend them from all those who would conquer and enslave them. Similarly, God will provide for their spiritual needs too. As long as they hold to the Law that God has given, God will remain in spiritual fellowship with them and dwell among them.
- D. God remains faithful to His end of the bargain, but Israel does not. Not once, but repeatedly, they break the covenant they have made with God. God punishes them and even allows them to be carried off into captivity, but He does not abandon them. For the next 1500 years, they and they alone remain God's chosen people.

II. Prophecy.

- A. At the end of that time period, though, God causes His prophets to utter prophecies that foretell a change in the way that His chosen people will be named. We hear the first of these prophecies from the lips of John the Baptist in Luke 3:7-9. To the Jews of John's day, his words here must have been profoundly disturbing. Throughout their national history, they have trusted in their special status as God's chosen people. Like an adulterous spouse, they've done whatever they wanted to in the knowledge that God would always take them back. What John is telling them now, though, is that those days are over. They need to repent right now, or

else they will be severed from God and destroyed. Their chosen-people status won't protect them any more. What's even more interesting, though, is John's implication that the class of God's chosen people is not a closed one. If God can make stones into children of Abraham, surely He can do the same to other people.

- B. We see a similarly unnerving prophecy from Jesus in Matthew 21:41-42. In fact, from the Jewish perspective, this one is even worse. Jesus here is speaking immediately to the leaders of the Jews, but His condemnation touches the entire nation. There aren't any repent-or-else clauses in what Jesus says here. There isn't any way the Jews can avoid the doom that Jesus is foretelling. Instead, He tells them quite plainly that they aren't going to be God's chosen people any more. God's blessings are going to be taken from them and given to a nation who is going to use those blessings to produce the righteousness that God wants.

III. The Fulfillment.

- A. We see the fulfillment of these prophecies about a change in God's chosen people in the story of the early church. One of the most telling incidents in this story occurs in Acts 13:45-47. Here's what happens: Paul and Barnabas have gone to the city of Antioch of Pisidia to preach the gospel to the Jews living there. However, the gospel stirs up such interest that even all the Gentiles of that city turn out to hear the word of the Lord. You might think that the Jews would want others to learn about their God, but exactly the opposite is the case. Instead, they think that bringing Gentiles in diminishes their standing as God's special chosen people. Rather than helping Paul, they oppose him instead. In response, Paul condemns the Jews and begins to preach exclusively to the Gentiles. It is now they whom God is calling to Him.
- B. We see Peter discussing the implications of both this Jewish rejection and Gentile acceptance in 1 Peter 2:7-9. His point is that the gospel was the Jews' last chance to remain God's people. Instead of listening, though, they did exactly what Christ prophesied they would do back in Matthew 21. They rejected Christ as the cornerstone of their faith and stumbled over Him instead. They aren't His people anymore.
- C. By contrast, though, look at the way that God describes those who believe in Jesus. Now they are God's chosen generation, royal priesthood, holy nation, and special people. All of those terms that were applied to the nation of Israel in Deuteronomy have now been applied to Christians instead. Just as Paul described them in Acts 13, they were called out of darkness into the light of Christ. There can be no doubt about what this passage describes. God's chosen people are no longer the disobedient and evil Jews. Instead, just as John and Jesus prophesied would happen, He chose a new people for Himself—Christians.
- D. The implications of this for us today are profound. Just as the Christians of the first century were God's chosen people, so too the Christians of the twenty-first century are God's chosen people. The holy nation that God has chosen for Himself isn't found along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, it will never be found there again. Instead, we find the spiritual children of Abraham wherever God's people assemble to do His will. As long as the earth endures, we ourselves will be the special people who belong to Him.
- E. All of this raises a question, though: what about the physical nation of Israel? What happened to the promise that God made to Abraham? Does God go back on His promise? This very question is where the premillennialists stake out their position. They say that God is like the betrayed husband who has no choice but to accept his cheating wife back, over and over again, no matter what she does. Because God once made a promise to take the physical nation of Israel for His own once, He's stuck with them forever.
- F. Interestingly enough, Paul devotes a substantial chunk of the book of Romans to a discussion of this very point. One of the first objections he raises to this argument is that it misunderstands the nature of the promise of God. Look at Paul's words in Romans 9:6-8. According to Paul here, what determines whether someone is part of God's chosen people is not his flesh-and-blood descent from Abraham. If that were so, all of Abraham's descendants through Hagar and Keturah and all the rest would be just as much God's chosen people as the children of Israel. Instead, what is important is God's promise. If God promises that a certain group will be His chosen people, or if He decrees that they are His chosen people, it's God's word, not human notions of descent, that matter. As Paul writes in Romans 4, the holy nation fathered by Abraham is still alive today, but it is those who have the faith of Abraham, not the DNA of Abraham, who are its citizens. That is the way that God has chosen to fulfill His promise, and what God says, goes.
- G. Of course, this doesn't mean that the physical descendants of Abraham have been totally rejected by God and can no longer be part of His chosen people. Instead, they join with that holy nation in the same way that anyone else does: by following His plan of salvation. Look at Paul's comments on the subject in Romans 10:12-13. God no longer cares who our parents were, or our grandparents were, or our anybody else's were. Instead, all that concerns Him is whether we seek our salvation from Him. If we do, we are part of His chosen people. If we don't, we're not. It would be great if all the Jews in Israel one day obeyed the gospel en masse. I'd be delighted to see it. However, I don't expect it to happen, nor is there anything in God's word that requires it to happen. God's chosen people aren't the Jews anymore. Instead, they are Christians, and Christians can have either Jewish blood or Gentile blood. It doesn't matter. If we obey Him, we are His.

Conclusion. If you need to obey Him tonight by calling on the name of the Lord, please do so.