

Israel: God's People, God's Land

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THE old man stood high on the hillside, the Israelites below him hushed and expectant as they waited for him to continue. These were his people, the flock he had shepherded for over 40 years. Moses' voice rang clear through the desert air: "*The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth*" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

"*It was not because you were more in number than any other people,*" he reminded them. Numbers have never mattered to God. Quality is more important than quantity, to Him. "*It is because the LORD loves you,*" he went on, "*and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand*" (verses 7-8). How He had loved them, in spite of their rebellious spirit, their hankering after the Egypt from which He had called them out! Those decades of eating manna, enduring discipline and wandering in the wilderness had finally forged the Children of Israel into a unique nation, a people with a history and a destiny.

The Chosen Nation

Was Moses being too starry-eyed, too close to the Israelites to see things in perspective, when he spoke of them as the "chosen people"? The answer is a resounding "No". Over 1,000 years later, even after that same rebellious spirit had driven them into captivity in Babylon, Zechariah the prophet could still write to the people of Judah: "*Thus said the LORD of hosts... he who touches you touches the apple of his eye*" (Zechariah 2:8).

There is nothing we treasure more than our eyesight; to touch the eyeball causes instant pain and a violent reaction. This is how God felt when nations had oppressed the people He loved. 500 years later still, after the Jews had killed God's Son and rejected the Gospel, the Apostle Paul asks, "*Has God rejected His people?*" He replies, emphatically, "*By no means*". "*They are beloved,*" he declares, "*for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable*" (Romans 11:1,28,29). Like the father of the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, God's love for His people has never changed, even though they have often made Him sad.

The idea that God has a special relationship with the nation of Israel does not go down well today. Our society is pre-occupied with equality and equal opportunity. Why should God choose one nation out of the many that fill the globe? What is so special about that tiny strip of land between the continents, the country we now call Israel, for which He seems to have such a deep regard?

A short answer to this question would be that as God is the Creator, He does not have to answer to us for what He does. We view His work from a very short time-span, compared with the eternity through which He operates. We must be prepared to wait a very long time if we want to know why He does things a certain way.

God's Design

It is like walking past a building site when a new Town Hall or office block is being built. We peer through the gap in the fencing, and all we see is mud and holes, cranes and scaffolding,

noisy activity with no obvious end-product. We know, of course, the activity is not *really* aimless. Tucked away in the Contractor's cabin are drawers of plans, and flow charts listing the dates by which the foundations, walls, roof and services will be complete. If we were good at technical drawing, we could leaf through the plans and visualise the final appearance of the building, admiring the grace and practicality of the design. But, at first sight, just walking by, we may go home and grumble that the Council is wasting its money.

Looking at God's work is very like that. We shall never see things in perspective, unless we step inside the cabin and look at the plans. And that is where we hope to help in this booklet: to open up God's great design, revealed in the Bible. God has a set of plans, and a schedule with the order of operations carefully laid out. The building He is constructing is called the Kingdom of God, and one day, when all the stages of preparation are complete, He will reveal an earth filled with grace and beauty, inhabited by people from all the past centuries who have loved and waited for Him. With Jesus as their King, they will govern the peoples of the earth in an age of peace when at last God's will is done. And the nation of Israel will be seen, in that day, to have been the framework of the structure, the joists and beams on which the many rooms and corridors depend.

Let us look through the Bible, then, to see from God's point of view what has been happening this last 4,000 years.

In the passage we quoted from Romans chapter 11, Paul said that the Jews were beloved "*for the sake of their forefathers*". The man all Jews look back to as the father of their race is Abraham, the son of Terah. Abraham was brought up in a city called Ur, close to the River Euphrates in what is now Iraq. At an age when most people are thinking of retiring, Abraham had a visitation from the Lord who asked him to leave Ur of the Chaldees: "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house,*" he said, "*to the land that I will show you*" (Genesis 12:1).

Abraham – Father of the Nation

It was a lot to ask of anyone, but with what turned out to be a characteristic faith in God, Abraham sold up and moved out, not knowing, to begin with, exactly where he was going. After a long trek up the Euphrates, he was guided to the west and south until he came to a 200 mile long strip of land between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea, mountainous in the centre, with coastal plains to the west and the Sinai desert to the south. No one appreciated, at that stage, the strategic position of the land of Israel, sited at the junction of three great land masses. Nor could they foresee the beauty it will have, one day, when the desert is made to blossom as the rose. That was all tucked away in the drawer of plans. God promised Abraham simply, "*To your descendants I will give this land*" (Genesis 12:7).

There was an irony about this statement. Although Abraham and his wife had been happily married for many years, to their intense regret they had had no children. Yet God was promising the land to their *descendants*! The promise was repeated and expanded as the years passed, but Abraham and his wife moved round the land in their tents, still childless, and no nearer to possessing the land than when they first arrived.

One night Abraham had opportunity to question the messenger from the Lord more closely. "I am the LORD," he had just been told, "who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess". Instantly Abraham unburdened his anxiety. "O Lord GOD," he asked, "how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Genesis 15:7-8). To confirm and guarantee His promise, the Lord proceeded to make a solemn covenant with Abraham, after the custom of the times, sealed with the blood of sacrifice. At the same time, He outlined His plans: "Your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for 400 years; but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions... And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (verses 13,16).

Isaac, Jacob and the Twelve Tribes

This remarkable prophecy illustrates how detailed are God's plans, and how precise is His foreknowledge. See now how accurately it was fulfilled. Abraham becomes the father of a son, called Isaac. His grandson, Jacob, has 12 sons, whose offspring form the 12 tribes of Israel. As predicted, the Israelites move south into Egypt, a foreign land, in a time of famine. Their numbers grow, and they are enslaved by the Pharaohs. Moses, with whom we began our story, is given the task of leading them out. After 10 dramatic plagues or disasters had brought Egypt to its knees, the night eventually came when the Israelites were to leave. So scared were the Egyptians of the God of Israel, that they pressed their valuables on their former slaves. "Jewellery of silver and of gold and clothing they let them have what they asked. Thus they despoiled the Egyptians" (Exodus 12:35,36). The record notes, almost casually, "The time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was 430 years" (v. 40). Just a note, in passing. Yet every detail of the prophecy had now come true: the sojourn in a foreign land; the slavery; the taking of a spoil; the 400 years. All precisely as predicted.

But there were moral implications to the prophecy as well. God had judged the Egyptians, through the catastrophic plagues, for their ill-treatment of Abraham's people. Moreover, the Israelites were now on their way to the same land where Abraham had pitched his tents. Four generations had gone by, and the inhabitants had filled it with violence and open immorality. In God's eyes, the iniquity of the Amorites (inhabitants of the land of Canaan, or Palestine) was now full. Thus Moses explained to the eager Israelites: "Not because of your righteousness are you going in to possess their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you" (Deuteronomy 9:5).

This brief introduction shows us how immensely complex is God's control of human affairs. As the Creator and sustainer of the earth, He oversees the rise and fall of nations, according to their moral standards. He detained the Israelites in Egypt, so that having experienced slavery and suffering they could value freedom. At the same time He allowed four generations of Amorites the opportunity to repent from the evil ways of their fathers, and then displaced them by the Israelites. As the Apostle Paul once wrote of God: "How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways!"

We must press on to see the next stage of His great plan for Israel and their land.

Blessings and Cursings

At the start of their wilderness journey, Moses brought to the Israelites the Law of God. This great national code not only restrained crime, but lifted people up to show love and respect for the poor, the alien and even their enemies. On the slopes of Mount Sinai, he joined the people to God in a great covenant, sealed, like Abraham's, with the blood of sacrifices, under which they agreed to keep those commandments. In return, God promised them a long and happy life in the land He was giving to them. However, there were conditions. Their continued possession of the land was dependent on their obedience. If, like the Amorites, they defiled it with blood and barbarity, their tenancy would be terminated.

This brings us to the next remarkable prophecy about Israel, in which Moses was able to foretell their history for hundreds, even thousands, of years. To memorialise their agreement with God, He pronounced on the people a series of blessings and cursings, which they were to recite aloud and write down for a witness on entering the land. They are to be found in Deuteronomy chapter 28. The first 14 verses are concerned with the blessings they would enjoy if they were obedient. The rest of the long chapter outlines the troubles God would bring upon them with increasing intensity, if they failed to honour their promise. At first their economy would go wrong. The rains would fail, and crops would shrivel. Their enemies would get the better of them, and foreign kings would rule over them. As the pressure increased, they would be invaded and besieged, and taken away into captivity. Eventually, Moses warned, "*The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other... And among these nations you shall find no ease, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot... night and day you shall be in dread, and have no assurance of your life*" (verses 64-66). Verse by verse, it was a terrifying catalogue of growing calamity.

The amazing thing is, it all came true. After the 40 years wandering, the Israelites took over the land of the Amorites. Ruled by leaders called Judges for 500 years, they reached the pinnacle of their power and prosperity in the time of their early kings, David and Solomon. Their devotion to the Lord and their obedience to His law had brought about the blessings promised by Moses. But then, slowly, they drifted away from God. They imported the worship of foreign gods from the nations around them. They preserved an outward form of piety in observing the festivals and sacrifices of the Law, but neglected to care for the poor and oppressed. Inevitably, the curses began to bite. Neighbouring countries like the Syrians and Edomites encroached upon their territory. The mighty Assyrians crossed the Euphrates, put them to tribute, then deported 10 of the 12 tribes into captivity.

God was extremely patient with His people. Through the prophets, great men like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, He sent them constant reminders that they were breaking their promises to keep His laws. "*Wash yourselves,*" Isaiah pleaded, "*make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes*" (Isaiah 1:16). But the response was not there.

Eventually, around 587 BC, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and took Judah and Benjamin away. For 70 years the land was empty of all but the poorest Jews. After that time, a proportion were allowed to return from Babylon. They picked up the thread of national life, without a king, and were subject in turn to the Persians, Greeks and Romans. It was into their oppressed world that Jesus of Nazareth was born.

The Son of David

The sending of Jesus was God's most poignant appeal to His people. In the Parable of the Vineyard, Jesus likened the people of Israel to the tenants of a vineyard. When God, the owner, sent His servants, the prophets, to collect the rent, they beat them up and sent them away. *"Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will respect him.'... And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him"* (Luke 20:13-15). Jesus knew, too well, what lay ahead of him. He also knew that God's wrath would shortly burst over the heads of his listeners. *"Fill up,"* he cried, *"the measure of your fathers"* (Matthew 23:32). Like the Amorites before them, Israel was filling up the measuring pot of their iniquity. The vineyard would be given to others.

30 years after Jesus was crucified, the Jews rebelled against Rome. A strong army besieged and captured Jerusalem, filling the streets with corpses and destroying the temple. Another 60 years, and the revolt of AD 132 sealed their fate. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were sold into slavery, increasing the already substantial Jewish populations of many provinces of the Roman Empire – and beyond. The Israelites, as Moses had foreseen, became the Wandering Jews, to be found in practically every country of the world, despised, reviled and hounded by persecution from city to city. For long centuries, exactly as the cursings had warned, they had no rest for the soles of their feet.

God's Purpose in His Son

The murder of God's Son was the ultimate act of rebellion by the Chosen People. Yet even that wicked deed had been anticipated in God's plan. The Apostle Peter, speaking to the Jews in Jerusalem six weeks after the event, insisted that Jesus had been *"delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God"* (Acts 2:23). Indeed, the prophet Isaiah, in his heart-rending chapter 53, had predicted long beforehand Jesus' suffering: *"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"* (v. 3).

Why, you may ask, did God allow His only Son to die in shame and agony? The answer is complex, and yet it is central to God's plan to save men from their sins. On that hill outside Jerusalem, God brought the self-denial and grace and love of Jesus face to face with the human lusts of pride, envy and cruelty which are in all our hearts, and which the Bible calls sins. For three days, sin appeared to have triumphed. But Jesus, the sinless, rose from the grave after that short time, so breaking the power of death for those who believe in him. *"He was bruised,"* Isaiah continues, *"for our iniquities... and with his stripes we are healed"* (v. 5). So, when those conscience-stricken Jews, realising they had killed God's Son, asked Peter on the day of Pentecost what they should do, he explained that the risen Christ had become the sacrifice that could take their guilt away: *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."* The immediate response was impressive. 3,000 Jews were baptized. But with the passage of time, it became clear that the majority of God's chosen people remained unconvinced. Their pride in being descended from Abraham had blinded them to the need for faith, that quality which entitled Abraham to be called *"the friend of God"*.

"Has God rejected His people?"

This rejection of the Gospel by the Jews, followed by their final scattering, might lead one to conclude that God has finished with the Jews. Paul addresses himself to precisely this question in Romans chapter 11: "*God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew*", he writes (v. 2). Although as a nation Israel had turned her back on God, there were individuals within the nation who did respond, such as those who listened to Peter on the Day of Pentecost. And that was all that mattered. As Moses taught, numbers are unimportant to God. Quality matters more than quantity. "*So too at the present time,*" Paul continues, "*there is a remnant, chosen by grace*" (v. 5). Nothing had gone wrong with God's plan. The scattering of Israel simply meant it was entering a new phase.

As the Jewish political organisation tottered towards its end, the call of the Gospel was dramatically widened: for the first time, Gentiles were invited to share in the privilege of knowing the eternal God. Paul was the foremost and most energetic leader of this preaching to the Gentiles. "*It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you,*" he declared to the Jews at Antioch. God's people had been given the first opportunity to hear the good news about Jesus. However, "*since you thrust it from you,*" he continued, "*and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles*" (Acts 13:46). Gentiles are people of any nation other than Israel. Through the work of the apostles, and the spread of the Scriptures, the door has been opened to people like you and me to come close to God.

We can become Chosen People, with the same promises and enjoying the same Fatherly care that God bestowed on Abraham and his descendants. "*There is neither Jew nor Greek,*" Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise*" (Galatians 3:28,29). "*Once you were no people,*" adds Peter, quoting from the prophecy of Hosea, "*but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy*" (1 Peter 2:10)

In Romans 11, Paul compares Israel to a fine olive tree, which, regrettably, produced no fruit. God has pruned out the barren branches and replaced them instead with wild olive shoots, grafted into the ancient trunk. These Gentile olive shoots now share the rich sap of the parent tree. The fall of Israel was the Gentiles' opportunity.

It is worth noting that, as with Israel, so with the Gentiles, the response to the call is still limited to individuals. The "remnant" principle still applies. James, another apostle, put it crisply when he described the call of the first Gentiles, Cornelius and his household: "*God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name*" (Acts 15:14). It will only ever be a few who are "taken out", selected by their response to the call to repentance. And the conditions for acceptance by God are still faith and obedience, just as they were for Abraham.

This new phase of God's plan, the call of the Gentiles, has been running for nearly 2,000 years, a period as long as the call of Israel. We are now ready to move on, and ask whether the Bible reveals yet further stages to God's plan, ahead in our future.

The Return of Israel

On the campus of the Tel Aviv University in Israel there stands a remarkable museum called Beth Hatuphuthsoth, 'House of the Dispersion'. It is a graceful new building packed with the very latest in audio-visual aids. It aims to show young Jews of today how their fathers preserved their beliefs and culture during centuries of wandering, how they kept themselves pure from inter-marriage, and how they returned to the land of their dreams. In a darkened bowl-shaped auditorium, rays of light project on to the curved ceiling above the audience a world map where tiny stars represent the known communities of Jews from the times of Assyria, Babylon and Rome onwards. Practically every country of the world has received Jews at some time. As the centuries pass by, the stars in the display move eerily, as persecution drives the Jews from one country to another. France, Germany, Spain, Poland, Great Britain – each act of terror is catalogued in lights. Sometimes the lights go out, as whole communities pass into oblivion. Then, amazingly, the pinpoints of light begin to move back to the Land of Israel, as the Return gets under way in the twentieth century.

Whole galleries of the Beth Hatuphuthsoth museum are devoted to the fortunes of Jewish communities in particular lands – a pagoda-style synagogue modelled on the one in Peking, a reconstruction of a wedding in the Ukraine, a Jewish rabbi pleading for his life before a Jesuit priest in the Inquisition, and most moving of all, in letters of fire, the last words penned by Jews who faced death in the German Holocaust.

The pace and emotion quicken as the exhibition reaches the last joyful stages of the Return. Everything is painstakingly chronicled. First come the thoughts of a national home penned by Weizmann in Russia under the Czars, the publishing of Herzl's *The Jewish State* in 1896, and the Zionist Congress of 1897. There follows the slow, grinding labour of the early settlements in Palestine under the Turks. The British mandate after the First World War allows more and more Jews to return. Finally, the agony of Hitler's repression creates an irresistible pressure in Europe and precipitates a chain of events leading finally to the formation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Since those exciting days, as we know, hardly a day goes by without some mention of the tiny State in our newspapers. No bigger than Wales, with a population two-thirds that of London, Israel is now prominent in world affairs. The Suez crisis of 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur battles in October 1973, the invasion of Lebanon in 1984 – whether you resent or admire their prowess, the Israelis have a new, vital national spirit that defies all the rules of history. Never before has a nation been driven systematically from its land, survived 25 centuries of uprooting, and come back to life on its ancient hills with such remarkable vigour.

What, we must ask, is the meaning of all this? Is it some fantastic coincidence, that God's people should survive, when so many other nations in history have perished? There is a straightforward answer. Right at the end of the blessings and cursings we looked at in the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses wrote these significant words: "When all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God... then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes, and have compassion upon you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD

your God will gather you, and... will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, that you may possess it" (Deuteronomy 30:1-5).

The return is no accident of history. It is the deliberate act of a loving, merciful God.

Jeremiah puts it just as plainly: *"I am with you to save you, says the LORD; I will make a full end of all the nations among whom I scattered you, but of you I will not make a full end" (30:11).* How true are those words! The Assyrians, the Babylonians, and the Romans, who scattered Israel, have disappeared, but the Jews survive. *"I have loved you with an everlasting love,"* the prophet goes on, *"therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (31:3).*

Or Ezekiel: *"I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you... and the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by" (36:24-26,34).*

We could go on. There are many, many similar prophecies in the Old Testament, each describing aspects of the return we have been witnessing in our own time. There is no doubt it is the work of God Himself.

Now, ask yourself: Why should God want the Jews back in their ancient homeland? What is it leading up to? The answer to that question is the most dramatic of all: it is the coming of the Kingdom of God! Before you scoff at this idea, just listen again to the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus: *"He will be great... and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever" (Luke 1:32,33).* Did Jesus reign over the Jews when he was on earth before? The answer is "No". *"We have no king but Caesar,"* they cried. They rejected him, and he was crucified.

But Jesus rose from the dead to an immortal life. A King who reigns for ever *needs* to be immortal. That prophecy of Gabriel requires an immortal Jesus to return to Jerusalem where David's throne was, and rule over a land populated by Jews. 100 years ago, this would not have been possible. The Jews were still scattered, and the Turks ruled over the Holy City. Today, we find the land inhabited by nearly 4 million Jews (and by other ethnic groups as well); and Jerusalem once more the capital of Israel. Consider, again, the promise of Jesus to his apostles: *"I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30).*

For this simple, straightforward blessing to be given to Peter, James, John and their fellows, they must be brought back from the dead, for none of them reigned over Israel in his lifetime. There must also be an Israel for them to reign over, with Jesus. All of this is entirely possible today. Israel has survived, and God has brought Israel back to their land, in preparation for the Kingdom of God.

There is absolutely no doubt that Jesus is going to come back from heaven, and then will come the time of reward for all those who, like the apostles, have followed him faithfully. Jesus tells us this plainly in the Parable of the Nobleman, who went into a far country, to receive kingly power and then return (Luke 19:11-27). During his absence he left his servants to look after his business interests. Significantly, the citizens of the country sent a message after him to say, *"We do not want this man to reign over us"*. Jesus spoke this parable, Luke

says, "*because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately*" (v.11). Jerusalem was the place of David's throne. Jesus, the disciples believed, was the King, and they thought he was going to reign, there and then.

But the time was not ripe. He had to suffer for the sins of men, and rise from the dead, and go away to his Father's right hand for 19 long centuries. Jesus himself is the Nobleman, and heaven the far country. The Jews, who were supposed to be his people, rejected him, just as the parable said. But see how it concludes. At his return, having received the Kingdom, the Nobleman inspects his household, and promotes his loyal and industrious servants to positions of honour – reigning over 10 cities, or 5 cities, according to their ability. At the same time, his enemies are slain. The time for the Nobleman to return is very near. We must prepare for the day of inspection.

Looking into the Future

So far, we have been following God's plan steadily through to the late 20th century. Does the Bible permit us to lift the curtain and see beforehand the sequence of events which occur as the Kingdom of God begins to replace the world of today? The answer is a qualified "Yes". The problem is, there are many prophecies to fit together. It is like assembling the pieces of a huge jigsaw puzzle, where the broad outline is clear, but the details do not yet all fit into place.

Firstly, it is plain that the Jews themselves must undergo spiritual renewal before they are fit for Jesus to be their King. It is a sad fact that devotion to God, which was so real to them during their dispersion and persecution, has been abandoned by so many now that they have returned. There has to be a major change of heart before they can truly become God's people. We saw this in the beautiful passage from Ezekiel, describing the return: "*I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses*" (Ezekiel 36:25). Malachi writes of "*Elijah the prophet*" being sent, like John the Baptist was, "*before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes*", to prepare God's people for the coming of Jesus (4:5,6).

No doubt a minority of the people will respond to this message, as they did in the First Century. For the majority, however, "*the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up*" (Malachi 4:1). The catastrophe that purges those Jews living in the land of Israel is to be a mighty invasion by an army made up of many nations, combining forces to attack and at last to capture Jerusalem, the jewel in Israel's crown. The theme comes across in numerous passages. "*I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle,*" writes Zechariah, "*and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered*" (14:2). "*I will gather all the nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat*" (outside Jerusalem), adds Joel (3:2). "*You will bestir yourself,*" Ezekiel says to Gog, the prince of Meshech and Tubal (ancient names for Russia), "*and come from your place out of the uttermost parts of the north, you and many peoples with you... you will come up against my people Israel, like a cloud covering the land*" (Ezekiel 38:14-16). Somehow, this invasion is not just against Israel, but against God Himself, and His Son. "*The kings of the earth set themselves,*" sang David in Psalm 2, "*and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed [Christ], saying, 'Let us burst their bonds asunder...'*" (vv. 2,3).

It will be a black day for Israel, with their cities captured, prisoners taken, and multitudes slain. But the outcome is clear. It is in that day of trouble that Jesus appears to his people, as their Saviour. He brings them not only relief from their enemies, but pardon from their sins. "When they look on him whom they have pierced," Zechariah shows, "they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child... On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (12:10; 13:1). "The Deliverer will come from Zion," quoted Paul, "he will banish ungodliness from Jacob" (Romans 11:26).

The mode of destruction for the enemies besieging Jerusalem is unorthodox, but devastatingly effective. A mighty earthquake shakes the land, dividing the Mount of Olives, and an unearthly fire consumes the hosts in the open field. "*You will be visited by the LORD of Hosts, with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire. And the multitudes of all the nations that fight against Ariel [Jerusalem]... shall be like a dream, a vision of the night*" (Isaiah 29:6-7). Ezekiel says it will take seven months to bury the dead (Ezekiel 39:11-16).

The sequel is breathtaking. The Jews, having been brought forcibly to see how far they have gone away from God, return to Him and find the peace of reconciliation and forgiveness. From all the nations under heaven, a mighty Exodus begins, dwarfing the present-day Return, with two great streams of returning Jews from north and south. "*In far countries they shall remember me, and with their children they shall live and return. I will bring them home from the land of Egypt, and gather them from Assyria,*" writes Zechariah (10:9-10). "*He will raise an ensign for the nations,*" adds Isaiah, "*and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth*" (11:12).

As in the original Exodus, the rebels are purged out, and those who complete the journey are united in the land of Israel with their brethren who have survived the northern invasion. Here the repentant people become the nucleus of a mighty empire ruled by King Jesus, whose reign will bring peace and joy to all the nations of the earth. "*At that time,*" rejoices Jeremiah, "*Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem*" (3:17). "*Out of Zion shall go forth the Law,*" reads Micah, "*and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples*" (4:2,3). "*With righteousness,*" writes Isaiah, "*he shall judge the poor... and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*" (11:4,9).

The Wilderness Transformed

At last, the plan of God comes to its climax. After thousands of years of preparation, the people of the Kingdom are brought together. The leaders and princes are the faithful disciples from all ages, raised from the dead with the apostles to reign with their King. The subjects are the restored Israel, and the nations of the earth who share in their happiness. Now, at last, the reason why God chose that tiny land become plain, as it forms, at the hub of the continents, the headquarters of Christ's administration. And now the promises made to Abraham about his descendants, are fulfilled – promises made so long ago but never forgotten by Abraham's God.

As Jesus brings relief to the oppressed and teaches men all over the world to love one another, the blessings God once promised begin to fill the earth. The wilderness turns into fields and forests to feed the hungry. "May there be abundance of grain in the land," sings the Psalmist, "on the tops of the mountains may it wave" (72:16). Yes, even on the hills, barren from neglect and the exploitation of greedy man, great harvest crops will be provided by a bountiful God. "Like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands" (Isaiah 65:22).

What a glorious picture this is to look forward to, something in which all can share! To see the earth set free from endless war and violence, from disease and tears and suffering. "Your eyes will see the king in his beauty," promises Isaiah, "Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation" (Isaiah 33:17,20). "The ransomed of the LORD shall return," he concludes, "and come to Zion with singing... they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (35:10). "They shall be priests of God and of Christ," wrote John in the Book of Revelation, "and they shall reign with him a thousand years" (Revelation 20:6). For all that time Jesus and his immortal princes will reign over the earth. "He must reign," writes the apostle, "until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25,26). Although during the kingdom disease and famine will have been restrained and life lengthened, death will not finally be taken away until all sin, the cause of death in the beginning, has at last been rooted out from the hearts of men. And those who see that glorious end, and live on eternally into the time beyond, will be one with God and His Son for ever.

This Kingdom of which the Bible speaks, lies just round the corner in time, but the invitations to belong to it have already gone out. For the last 2,000 years, people of all nations have been called out, as we have seen, to prepare for its coming. Our share in its benefits is independent of race. We do not have to be Jews to be there. All we need is the faith that Abraham had, and the will to obey.

In one of his parables, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as a wedding banquet, to which people were summoned, even from the highways and hedges, to sit down at the feast. What an honour it would be, if we received through the post an invitation to dine with our earthly Sovereign or President. The fact is, we have been invited to something much greater. Through the Bible, we have received an invitation to sit down at table with Jesus, the King of the Kingdom of God! Usually when we are invited to a wedding, we feel we have to go out and buy a new suit or dress. But in this case, the wedding garments are provided by the host himself, free of charge. Jesus' own blood is the covering for our sin, and we have only to "put him on", in the ceremony of baptism, to be made clean and fit to stand before God. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ, have put on Christ," Paul wrote, in a passage at which we have already looked (Galatians 3:27).

The Coming Kingdom

"And if you are Christ's," he continued, "then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29). Imagine that: to be able to enjoy, today, the same mercy and forgiveness God will show to Israel in His Kingdom! And when it comes, to be heirs to Abraham's land, restored in all its beauty, and fellow-heirs to David's throne, and to a world where nations live at peace.

But first, a warning. The coming of Jesus will bring a Day of judgement, when the hearts of Jews and Gentiles are to be inspected by Jesus, the King. We need to make ready for that day. "God's righteous judgment will be revealed," warned Paul. "To those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour," he continues, "he will give eternal life; but for those who... obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury" (Romans 2:5-8). Glory, honour, immortality – all these can be ours in the Kingdom of God. In his last letter, Paul describes this great reward as "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me," he concludes, "but also to all who have loved his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

That day of Jesus' appearing could be very close. There is nothing in the world to stop us from laying hold of the wonderful promises God made to Abraham. The way has been prepared, through His great plan. He has shown us, through the history of His people the Jews, that we can trust His Word – the message of the Gospel contained in the Bible. But we must believe, and be baptized; and then live the life that Jesus requires of his disciples. "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

-- DAVID M. PEARCE

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