

ISRAEL IN GOD'S ECONOMY (2) – GOD'S CALLING, HIS PROMISES, AND HIS FAITHFULNESS

Understanding the role of the nation of Israel in God's economy begins from knowing Israel's origin. By the time of Genesis 11 the human race was in open rebellion against God. Then at the beginning of chapter 12, God called one man, Abraham, to have a new beginning. Genesis 12:1-3 records God's calling of Abraham, in which God made certain promises to him. In verse 2 He told Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation," and in verse 3 He said, "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed." The great nation here is the kingdom of God, which includes Israel. Then when Abraham arrived at the oak of Moreh, God appeared to him and said, "To your seed I will give this land" (v. 7m), that is, the land of Canaan that stretched before him.

Throughout the course of Abraham's sojourning God repeated and expanded upon His promises to Abraham:

For all the land that you see I will give to you and to your seed forever. And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth, so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then your seed can also be numbered. (13:15-16)

And He brought him outside and said, Look now toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them. And He said to him, So shall your seed be. (15:5-7)

And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your seed after you. And I will give to you and to your seed after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. (17:7-8)

I will surely bless you and will greatly multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens and like the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. (22:17)

God's promises to Abraham have had and will have both a physical and spiritual fulfillment. The physical fulfillment is with the nation of Israel; the spiritual fulfillment is with the church. This is typified in the promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17. There the stars of the heavens refer to the church, God's heavenly people (Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20), while the sand on the seashore refers to Israel, God's earthly people. In a physical sense the nation of Israel, brought forth through Abraham's descendants, including Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons, are Abraham's seed, and the land promised to them was and is to this day the land of Canaan. Moreover, it was through Israel that Christ was brought forth. Thus, ultimately the seed of Abraham refers to Christ (Matt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16), in whom all the nations of the earth have been blessed, and the good land refers to the Spirit received by the believers as the blessing of the gospel (v. 14). Furthermore, by being joined to Christ, the believers also become the seed of Abraham, the sons of God through faith (Gal. 3:7, 26, 29).

God confirmed to both Isaac and Jacob the promises He made to Abraham. To Isaac He said:

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you; for to you and to your seed I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and will give to your seed all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed. (Gen. 26:3-4)

When Isaac blessed Jacob, he said, "And may He give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your seed with you, that you may possess this land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham" (Gen. 28:4). God Himself reiterated this promise to Jacob. In Genesis 28:13b Jehovah said, "I am Jehovah, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie, I will give to you and to your seed."

When Jehovah told Moses to bring the nation of Israel out of Egypt to the good land, He said, "And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you as a possession. I am Jehovah" (Exo. 6:3-4, 8). When Moses was on Mount Sinai, the Lord told him that His intention was to make Israel "My personal treasure from among all peoples" (Exo. 19:5; cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). After Israel's great sin of making the golden calf idol, Jehovah charged Moses, saying: "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out

of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, To your seed I will give it” (Exo. 33:1). In Leviticus, Jehovah told Moses that if the people humbled themselves after coming under His discipline for walking contrary to Him, He would “remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac and also My covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land” (26:42). In Deuteronomy, as the people of Israel prepared to enter the good land, Jehovah referred to it as the land “which Jehovah swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (1:8; cf., 9:5; 29:13; 34:4).

We should not think that God has forsaken His promises to Israel. In a chapter in which he speaks of the coming of the Lord’s salvation to the Gentiles because the gospel was rejected by the Jews, Paul says strongly that God’s intention is to turn Israel to Himself again, “for the gracious gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). Thus, in his *Life-study of Romans* Brother Lee told us, “God’s gifts and God’s calling are eternal, without repentance, without change. Once God’s gift is given, it is given forever” (*Life-study of Romans*, 287).

Throughout the Old Testament the covenants that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are given as the reason for God’s continued care for the nation of Israel, even when Israel became degraded and turned away from Him. For example, in the reigns of Joash and Jehoash, kings of Israel who did evil in the sight of Jehovah, Israel was oppressed by the kings of Syria. Yet 2 Kings 13:23 says concerning Israel, “But Jehovah was gracious to them and had compassion on them and turned to them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and He would not destroy them; and He has not cast them from His presence until now.” When David brought the ark up to the tent of Ob-edom, he “ordained the giving of thanks to Jehovah by the hand of Asaph and his brothers” (1 Chron. 16:7), saying:

Remember His covenant forever, the word that He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant that He made with Abraham, and His oath unto Isaac. And He confirmed it unto Jacob as a statute, unto Israel as an eternal covenant, saying, to you I will give the land of Canaan, the portion of your inheritance. (vv. 15-18; cf. Psa. 105:8-11)

Our God is faithful (Isa. 49:7; 1 Thes. 5:24; Deut. 7:9), and His word abides forever (Isa. 40:8; 1 Pet. 1:25). Moreover, His word will accomplish what He delights in (Isa. 55:11). We should not presume to think that He will abandon His covenant with Israel. It is an eternal covenant.

In Romans 11 Paul also warns the New Testament Gentile believers not to exalt themselves, thinking that they are better than the Israelites. It is by the Israelites’ stumbling that the door of salvation has been opened to the Gentiles (v. 11). God’s extending His salvation to us is not a matter of merit but of God’s selection (Eph. 1:4). His salvation of us is His mercy toward us (Eph. 2:4-9). As Paul says, “It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy” (Rom. 9:16). Today we are still under God’s mercy, the recipients of His grace, and the benefactors of the new covenant established through the shedding of the precious blood of the Lord Jesus (Luke 22:20; Matt. 26:28). We have nothing to boast of in ourselves (1 Cor. 1:29; 4:7; 10:17; Rom. 5:11); our only boast is in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31; Phil. 3:3).

We are accustomed to seeing the history of Israel through the lens of their failures, but we need to consider it also through the lens of God’s covenant, purpose, and faithfulness. Just as in His dealings with the church God has never wavered in His purpose or His covenant, so it is in His dealings with Israel. To abandon His covenant and forsake His people Israel would be contrary to His nature (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17; 2 Tim. 2:13). In the midst of a great apostasy, the prophet Jeremiah could say, “It is Jehovah’s lovingkindness that we are not consumed, for His compassions do not fail; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22-23; cf. Psa. 78:37-38).

History shows us that just as Israel failed God, so the church has failed Him in countless ways throughout the centuries. Likewise, if we are enlightened by the Lord, we will realize that we personally have failed the Lord again and again. Without the same promise—“the gracious gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29)—we also would be disqualified for our failure to match the Lord in His righteousness, holiness, and glory (3:23 and footnote 1; Gen. 3:24 and footnote 1). As those who have received mercy and who by God’s mercy and grace stand with Him for the accomplishment of His heart’s desire, we should be those who pray for the consummation of His work upon and through Israel.