

Lecture 3 Glorious Future

THE JEWS

There is one matter which it is very important for us to consider when thinking of events which must occur before Christ can return. Many Christians believe that the Jews as a people will one day be converted to believe in Jesus as their Messiah. There is a special New Testament passage which it is vital for us to understand when thinking of the future and that is Romans 11. We believe that God here makes great promises concerning the Jews which are yet to be fulfilled. Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most theological of all the epistles and sets out clearly many of the great truths of the Christian faith.

Romans 1-8

In Romans chapter 1 Paul makes a great statement which in a way sets out the theme of this Epistle and declares what it is all about: 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith' (Romans 1:16-17). It is worth noticing in passing how we are told here that the gospel is to the Jew first. Many Christians today believe in what is called Replacement Theology. This is the idea that all the promises of the Old Testament in connection with the Jews belong now to the church. For them the church has replaced Israel and is the new Israel. They believe that with the crucifixion of Christ the Jews lost the special position they once had. While this is largely the case, it is not the full story. We must be careful lest we oversimplify the teaching of Scripture. We see here that, in writing to the church in Rome, Paul asserts that the Jews still have a special priority. The gospel is 'to the Jew first'. Wherever Paul went in his missionary journeys he first went to the Jews and to the synagogue with the good news and only when they rejected the message did he turn to the Gentiles. For example, when he was brought as a prisoner to Rome he explained the gospel first to the Jews and only when the majority of them rejected the gospel did he turn to the Gentiles warning the Jews, 'Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it' (Acts 28:28).

Paul proceeds in the rest of Romans 1 to show the sins of the Gentiles who did not have the Old Testament which contains the law of God. On them the wrath of God rested. In chapter 2 he demonstrates the sinfulness of the Jews who did have the law. In chapter 3 he concludes that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty before God and need salvation. In the second part of chapter 3 he presents Jesus Christ as the needed Saviour, the One who atones for our sins. In Chapters 4 and 5 he declares that justification is by faith alone in Christ alone. In chapters 6 to 8 he deals with sanctification and assurance. Then in chapters 9-11 he explains election and God's sovereignty in salvation, and this is the section on which we must especially focus.

Romans 9

In Romans chapter 9 Paul writes of his great love to his fellow Jews and his sadness at the way they have generally rejected Christ. He could wish himself lost if only the Jews were saved. He speaks of the wonderful privileges they had, 'the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises' etc (Romans 9:4). But not all Jews are lost. Election is very important. God chose Isaac but not Ishmael. Rebecca had twins but God's election was shown in that even before they were born, or had done good or evil, it was said to her, 'The elder shall serve the younger' (v12). And so it is written: 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated' (v13). The potter has power over the clay to make whatever type of vessel he wishes. God could show mercy to all, or to none, but rather chose to save some: 'Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth' (v18). Though Israel

were largely a rebellious people God always had His elect among them: 'Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved' (v27).

Romans 10

In chapter 10 Paul continues to speak of his love for his fellow Jews: 'Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge' (Romans 10:1-2). Israel here cannot possibly mean the church. He is referring to his kinsmen, the Jews, who are zealous in seeking to save themselves but, wrongly, as it is by works. He explains the way of salvation is by faith alone. He notes that Israel are still rejecting the gospel as Isaiah had prophesied they would: 'But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people' (10:21).

Romans 11

Paul begins Romans 11 by asking if God had completely rejected the Jews and notes that that cannot be the case because he himself, a Jew, is saved. He asserts that God did not cast away His people whom He foreknew and fore-loved. Israel had, and have a special place in God's election. He is aware that there is a godly remnant just as was the case in the days of Elijah: 'Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace' (11:5). Being a mere Israelite will save no one. It never did and never will, but election saves and the rest were blinded (v7).

The Apostle then asks a critical question in verse 11. Have the Jews stumbled so that they will totally fall away? He answers in a strong negative but proceeds to make an important point: 'Rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy' (v11). In a strange way the Jews' rejection of the gospel meant that God turned from them to the despised Gentiles in order to provoke the Jews to jealousy for their soul's salvation. Then a most important statement is made: 'Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness?' (v12). If, as was the case, the falling away of the Jews was a blessing to the Gentiles, how much more will their fullness and restoration be a blessing? Right through this section of the Epistle, Paul is obviously using the term 'Israel' and the term 'Jews' to describe ethnic Israel and not the church. Paul proceeds to make a great promise, 'For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?' (v15). Paul's argument runs as follows: If the rejecting of Jesus by the Jews brought salvation to many Gentiles, surely then the salvation of the Jews will bring a great blessing, a massive revival, 'life from the dead', to the Gentile church.

The Olive Tree

The Apostle next describes the church as being like an olive tree. The root grew in Old Testament times. The root is holy and so the branches, which though originally pagan Gentiles, are also holy. The Gentiles are like a wild olive tree some branches of which were cut from it and grafted into the good olive tree. Indeed, Jewish branches were broken off the good olive tree so as to allow this to happen. The Gentiles, however, are warned against pride: 'But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear: for if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee' (vv18-21).

The Gentiles have nothing to be proud of and are warned that they too can be broken off and rejected. Paul encourages the unbelieving Jews that they should not despair, but repent and believe and they will be saved: 'And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?' (vv23-24).

'All Israel'

The next verse (v25) is crucial in the argument of the Apostle: 'For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in' (v25). A 'mystery' in the New Testament is a secret hidden from past generations but now revealed. In Old Testament times salvation was largely restricted to the Jews, but now something wonderful has happened. Blindness in part has happened to the Jews. God in His sovereignty and justice has blinded them so that they cannot see that Jesus is the Messiah. Thankfully it has only been in part and there have been Jews like Peter and Paul who have been saved and indeed down through the centuries since the apostles there have always been a few Jewish converts. The Jews, as a whole, rejected Jesus and God has instead filled His church with Gentiles. There is here, however, that important word 'until'. The blindness which has come upon the Jews is only 'until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in'. The Apostle envisages a day coming when this will change. When the fullness of the Gentiles will have been brought in, a large number of them being converted, then something new will happen: 'And so all Israel shall be saved' (v26).

At this point many commentators suddenly and inexplicably take 'Israel' to mean the church composed of Gentiles and a few Jews when in all the other references in Romans 9-11 'Israel' clearly refers to ethnic Israel. Surely this is bad exegesis though very common? Unless there is an overwhelming reason for it, 'Israel' should be taken to mean what it means in the rest of the chapter. Here there is a clear prophecy that so many of the Jews will be saved that it can be said that 'all Israel shall be saved.' Just as it was previously said that they, Israel, had been cast away (v1) although a remnant was saved, so now it is said that all Israel shall be saved. That does not of course imply that every individual Israelite will be saved, but rather Israel as a whole. It is also important to emphasise that they can only be saved by exercising faith in Christ. They will not continue in unbelief. There is only one way of salvation for Jew and Gentile. As the Scripture says, 'There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob' (v26). This Deliverer is the Lord Jesus who by His Spirit turns sinners from their ungodliness, granting repentance now at last to the Jews, indeed the majority of Jews, as well as to Gentiles.

Beloved for their fathers' sake

The same theme is continued in the next verse (v27) and the 'them' referred to in that verse as well as the 'enemies' of the following verse can obviously refer to none but the ethnic Jews: 'For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins. As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes' (vv27-28). Why give 'Israel' in verse 26 a different meaning from the 'them' and the 'enemies' of verses 27 and 28? God made His covenant with Abraham and it is a covenant of grace, all of grace and therefore an eternal covenant. Similarly, God's covenant with Moses and Israel was a covenant of grace. Yes, the Jews were cast away for a time but then God returns to them. They still have a place in God's plan of election. The Jews became enemies in order that the gospel might reach the Gentiles, but God's election remains. Israel is beloved for their fathers' sakes (v28). God still has a purpose of mercy for the Jews. Verse 29 is wonderfully reassuring: 'For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance'. God bestowed His gifts and calling upon Israelites and they are still unique in His eyes. He hardened them for a time because of their unbelief but they are still special to Him. Here He is promising the restoration of Israel to a central place in His church.

A Future Day

Paul explains that the Gentiles in Rome were enemies in the past because of their unbelief in God, but now they have obtained mercy through the Jews' unbelief, 'Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy' (v31). We are to have a special concern and love in our hearts for the Jews and particularly to seek their salvation. Thinking of these things and looking forward to the day when his kinsmen according to the flesh will be grafted in again to the olive tree of the church, Paul breaks out into a doxology: 'O 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 hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath

been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen' (vv33-36). God is working out His plan of salvation and God still has a great purpose for the Jews. Although the Apostle grieves that for the time being the Jews are unbelievers, it fills his heart with joy to think of that future day when the Jews as a people will be converted and accept the true Messiah.

Not all Reformed theologians would agree with this interpretation of Romans 11. For example, Stuart Olyott in his commentary on Romans (*The Gospel as it Really is*) argues that there are no special promises for the Jews. In his classic *Systematic Theology*, Louis Berkhof writes of Christ that 'He does not hint at any prospective restoration and conversion of the Jewish people' (Page 699). Is that really true? In point of fact there are several passages where Jesus indicates that there will be a blessed day ahead for the Jews. For example, our Lord does say, 'Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled' (Luke 21:24). The 'until' clearly implies that there is a time coming when Jerusalem will no longer be trodden underfoot by the Gentiles. It implies that there is a time of blessing coming for Jerusalem and the Jews.

Another important statement of Jesus also implies the conversion of the Jews. Jesus mourns over the Jews and weeps over the judgment coming upon them for rejecting Him but also speaks of a coming day when their attitude will be totally different: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Matthew 23:37-39). Here Jesus is looking forward to the conversion of the Jews and the day that they will bless Him. He will not return again until the majority of Jews will repent and believe and rejoice in His coming.

While it is true that at present, 'Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it' (Matthew 7:14), many of His parables speak of better days ahead. In the parable of the leaven, Christ speaks of the kingdom spreading till the whole world is leavened or Christianised. The parable of the mustard seed implies that the church will not remain a tiny minority but become a great tree so that the birds of the air will come and dwell in its branches. Jesus compares the Jews to a fig tree, planted in a vineyard. The owner comes to the gardener saying, 'Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?' (Luke 13:7). For three years Christ laboured among the Jews, but there was little fruit. 'And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down' (vv8-9). Christ the Mediator intercedes for the Jewish fig tree. It was spared till AD70, and many Jews were saved but the general rejection of the Messiah continued till eventually it was cut down. However the stump remained in the ground, like Nebuchadnezzar's stump (Daniel 4). Jesus makes reference again to the fig tree when talking about the events preceding His second coming: 'Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors' (Matthew 24:32-33). When the stump of God's fig tree begins again to sprout and put forth leaves, the return of Christ is approaching. Again the implication here is that the Jews will yet be saved and become a fruitful tree in the vineyard of the Lord.

Ezekiel 37

There are many Old Testament passages which can be seen to teach the restoration of Israel. One of the clearest examples is Ezekiel 37, the valley of dead bones. Here Ezekiel, the prophet, is given an amazing vision. He is taken by the Spirit of the Lord into a valley which is full of bones. He had to walk among them to be convicted of the dire reality of the situation. There were many bones and they were very dry. What a horrible sight! All these skeletons around! Then he is asked a question: 'Can these bones live?' Surely the answer is obvious. Common sense says, No. But the prophet however wisely replies: 'O Lord God, thou knowest' (v3). God says to him: 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts' (v11). Israel is in captivity in Babylon,

Jerusalem is destroyed, the temple is burnt with fire and the Promised Land is empty. Israel is cut off and her hope for the future is lost.

Ezekiel is then given a strange command: 'Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live: And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord' (vv4-6). The prophet is to proclaim God's word to the heaps of bones.

As Ezekiel was prophesying we are told, 'There was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them' (vv7-8). What a remarkable, indeed hair-raising sight, that must have been! All round the valley bones were moving, finding other bones, sinews and flesh growing on them and skin covering the bodies, so that now there was a valley full of dead bodies. So many and yet still so dead!

The prophet is now commanded: 'Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live' (v9). Remember the word for breath, wind and spirit in Hebrew is the same, '*ruach*'. Now Ezekiel tells us: 'So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army' (v10). God's Spirit came down upon them causing a wonderful resurrection. What a sight, thousands of soldiers ready for battle!

The vision is then explained to the prophet: 'Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord' (vv12-14). Though at that specific point in time the situation seemed hopeless, yet God was going to do great things. Israel was to be spiritually resurrected, returned to their own land and become a mighty army for God. After seventy years the Jews returned, the temple was rebuilt on a far more modest scale and eventually the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt. But it was only a few Jews who returned. Their enemies said of them, 'What do these feeble Jews?' (Nehemiah 4:2). God helped them but there is no sign of the mighty army. They struggled on dominated by the great powers around them – the Persians, the Greek Seleucides and the Romans.

So how was this passage fulfilled, or how will it be fulfilled? Since the days of Ezekiel, there has been no mighty resurrection of the Jews or great army standing up for God. Replacement theologians spiritualise it and say it refers to the Christian church and yet there is a specific reference here to the Jewish people, their captivity and their land. God says, 'Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land' (Ezekiel 37:21).

Surely no one can consider the history of the Jews over the last 2000 years and fail to see the special hand and purpose of God in that people. Pilate was reluctant to execute Jesus knowing that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against Him by the Jews, but the Jews wanted rid of Jesus: 'Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children' (Matthew 27:25). In AD70 the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. They massacred millions of Jews and sold the rest as slaves. For the next 2000 years they were hounded from country to country. They were horribly persecuted by the Roman Catholic Inquisition, subjected to vicious pogroms by the Russians, six million of them were killed by the Nazis, everywhere they were hated. Antisemitism is universally common even to this day. Yet they have survived and kept their identity. Furthermore, contrary to all historical precedent, they have been settled again in their own land and already eight million of them, or half the Jews in the world have returned to the land of Israel. There they have been surrounded by numerous and powerful, hostile armies: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, etc, which from the day of their independence in 1948 have repeatedly attacked them, yet they have survived. And not only have they survived but now have become the superpower of the Middle East. How could this happen apart from the hand of God upon them for good?

But we are still awaiting the conversion of the Jews as a people. In 1948 there were some 30 Christian Jews in Israel. Today it is reckoned that there are some 30,000 and this number is increasing exponentially. We are looking for God to do even more. We are waiting for the Lord as it were to raise them from the dead and convert them for Himself into a mighty army to evangelise the world.

But is this idea of the conversion of the Jews an odd view held by just a few strange people? To the contrary, it was by far the commonest view of orthodox theologians from the time of the Reformation till the twentieth century. The Westminster Standards are the great standards of the Presbyterian Church, produced by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in the seventeenth century. The answer to Question 191 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* is very informative. In dealing with the Lord's Prayer the question is asked: 'What do we pray for in the second petition?' The answer given is as follows: 'In the second petition, (which is, *Thy kingdom come*,) acknowledging ourselves and all mankind to be by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in; the church furnished with all gospel-officers and ordinances, purged from corruption, countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate: that the ordinances of Christ may be purely dispensed, and made effectual to the converting of those that are yet in their sins, and the confirming, comforting, and building up of those that are already converted: that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him forever: and that he would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends.'

From this, it is plain that the Presbyterian Standards envisage the calling, the effectual calling, or conversion of the Jews and the fullness of the Gentiles which means the conversion of many Gentiles as a result flowing from the Jews' conversion. We should pray for, work for, and expect the conversion of the majority of the Jews to Christ before the second coming. It is foretold in many Old Testament passages. Zechariah, for example, wrote what God told him: 'And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn' (Zechariah 12.10). Here again we have a prophecy of the Jews being converted.