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the things we firmly believe

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Study 18: The People of God in History

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The People of God from the Beginning

It is impossible to understand the reality of God's people without coming to grips with the truth of God's *election*. *Election* is a strong theme of Scripture. It is word that really means 'choosing'. The people of God are the people of God because, and only because, He has chosen them. Being the people of God is, to look at it another way, a gift He bestows on us by His free and sovereign choice, and never a place we come to by right or by accomplishment .

At the beginning, God spoke and the man and the woman were created (Gen. 1:26ff). There is no 'starting material', no 'potentiality' with which God works; there is only the creative power of His own will and word. To this man and woman He gives blessing so that they may be fruitful and multiply and fulfil their mandate of subduing the earth (Gen. 1:28); without the blessing of God, this fruitfulness is impossible. Clearly from the beginning there is the intention of God that there be a people, a family involved with Him in His purposes for His creation. Paul picks that up in Ephesians 1:3-14, where he spells out more too of what is necessary in the fulfilment of that purpose given humanity's wilful slide into sin and rebellion.

Following the Fall, which was a declaration of independence from God, a refusal to have our identity in being the people of God, the serpent, Adam and Eve are brought to judgement by the LORD God (Gen. 3:14-19), and this discipline gives a promise that the offspring of the woman will finally crush the head of the serpent who has led them into this dreadful situation of sin. God's purpose with His people has not been undone by the rebellion of humanity. His purpose and election over-rule all of Satan's destructive intention and humanity's resistance toward Him.

In that elective purpose we see that before Israel came into being as God's people, there was a line of people from the fall onwards who called on the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26). Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve both bring offerings to God, but only Abel's offering is accepted. Hebrews 11:4 tells us that his offering was by faith—i.e. Abel did not bring his offering demanding that God accept it, but rather thanking Him for His acceptance of him and his offering because of His grace. Abel was the younger brother, and this is significant, for normally it is the elder brother who gets the father's blessing and the larger portion of the inheritance. It often happens in Scripture that the younger ends up being blessed rather than the elder (e.g. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph)—and this is to show God's elective purposes.

The Calling of the People , Israel

In His free choice, the Lord chose Abraham to be the father of a people who would be the people of God. Genesis 17:1-8 includes, for the first time in the Bible, the words that will become the chorus line for Israel's life, 'I will be their God.' In choosing Abraham in this seemingly exclusive way, the Lord has an inclusive intention for the whole world. Genesis 12:1-3 says:

The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

At the time of Abraham's call, he had not been seeking God or serving him. He had been an idol worshipper in a far country (Josh. 24:2ff; Deut. 26:5). His inclusion in this plan of God was entirely God's initiative. We must not think of Abraham, or of Israel, the people that descend from him, as being God's *favourites*. Being chosen is always with a view to having a part in God's universal intention that He have a family before Him filling the whole earth and drawn from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). The LORD's choosing of Israel was entirely on the basis of His elective and free love, and not at all in some potential He found in them, something He could use:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; 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. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:6-8)

Israel has its life by the grace of God, not by reason of obedience to law. In fact obedience flows out of its life, i.e. its relationship with the LORD based on his saving actions (e.g. Exod. 20:1ff). As God's people they have both function and purpose:

1. Israel is a people of covenant promise—covenant is God's gracious, unilateral decision to establish a relationship; within that relationship He promises a certain future for His people.
2. Israel is a holy people—a people belonging to God set apart to serve Him by holiness in life (Exod. 19:5-6). This holiness was to be a witness to the nations (Lev. 11:44 etc.)
3. Israel is a people trained by God. He was constantly involved in their life, maturing His people through His dealings with them. This included the difficulties they faced (e.g. slavery in Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land); at times these difficulties came as His disciplining chastisement of His people. This maturing was always with a view to their being a priest-nation to the world.
4. Israel is a people of prophecy. The predictions in the prophecy were not merely to appeal to the curious, but to announce to the world what God's plan for the nations was and how He was enacting that plan in the events of history.

Throughout the Old Testament we see time and again that God's interest was not simply in Israel, but rather Israel had its place in the plan of God for all the nations. The ultimate fortunes of Israel and the nations were linked together. Finally this link was in the coming of the promised Messiah who would rule with the LORD over the nations of the world (Psa. 2 and 110).

God's Multinational Intentions Made Clear In Christ

What may have been mistaken as a narrow focus on Israel in the Old Testament is shown to actually not be the case by the flowering out of God's world-wide intentions in the coming of Jesus Christ. The angel, at Christ's birth, announced good news of great joy for all the people, on earth peace to men on whom God's favour rests (Luke 2:10, 14). When Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist cried out, 'Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!' (John 1:29).

In that public ministry though, Jesus was focussed on his dealings with the people of Israel (Matt. 15:24). And yet, even with that, he extended his ministry to Samaritans and to a centurion, who most likely was a Gentile proselyte. Throughout Jesus' teaching he made clear indications that he was on a universal mission. And what is most shocking to Israel is that he talks of those of Israel being

excluded from the Kingdom whilst the Gentiles would be included (see Matt. 8:5-12). Elect Israel is, by refusing to receive the Messiah, placed aside while the Gentiles are brought into the kingdom.

After his death and resurrection, Jesus called on his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. The Spirit's coming would empower them to take the gospel not only to Israel, but to all Judea and Samaria and on, to the ends of the world (Acts 1:1-8). Paul's calling especially was with a view to the conversion of the Gentile nations. At first the inclusion of the Gentiles as full and equal sharers in the kingdom was a shock to Israelites, but the unmistakable seal of the Holy Spirit settled the issue. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 3:1-11:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Whatever could be said about Israel as God's people (as e.g. in the points 1-4 above) was now to be said about the church which was formed of Jews and Gentiles taken into union with Jesus Christ. All are brought into the true household of God (1Tim. 3:15). Jewish and Gentile distinctiveness is lost as a dividing issue.

The place of Israel the people/nation in God's ongoing plan is debated by Christians. In Romans 9–11 Paul discusses this matter. It doesn't seem to end all the debate! But what is clear in those chapters is that God has used the rejection of Christ by Israel to be the springboard for the mission to the Gentiles. Our inclusion in the kingdom (as Gentile-background believers) flows from this. If the Jews' rejection of Christ means this, what could their acceptance of the gospel mean? If they do not persist in unbelief then they will be grafted in, just as we have been. Paul seems convinced that this will happen at some point in the future. Whatever, 'the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable' and so we must not think of Israel as simply discarded on the coming of Messiah, just as the nations were not discarded in the choosing of Abraham and his descendants.

Now the church—all those who come to the Father through the Son, by the redemption that is provided through the Atonement, whether from Jewish or Gentile background—is working together with Christ in the outworking of the Father's plan. Christ is with his people with a view to the fulfilment at the end of this age. The Father has the nations in sight all the time. The church is less than it should be when it loses this focus, and settles into comfort with its own situation. That must surely be the case now—think of the terrible excess of spending and focus on comfort for Western Christians, compared with the tiny amount of money and effort into bringing the Gospel to those with no contact with it whatsoever. At the end the Father will have gathered a company from all the nations of the earth. Our task while here is to be part of that gathering of the eternal people of God through the proclamation of the Gospel by which, and which alone, men and women are made partakers of God's great salvation.