

Israel and God's Unrelenting Grace

The story of Israel is the story of God's amazing grace. As God's favor bestowed unconditionally on undeserving sinners, no one should ignore the role of God's grace in any discussion of Israel. The biblical record of Israel presents God's unrelenting grace that pursued the prodigal nation in the past and persists into the future.

God's grace in Israel's past.

Israel's story begins with the unconditional gracious covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis, chaps. 12 and 15). He promised to make of Abraham a great nation and bless the whole world. The incipient nation finds its name, *Israel*, from Abraham's grandson, Jacob (Gen. 32:28), a deceiver who nevertheless inherited the land God promised. God used his son, Joseph, to deliver Jacob (Israel) from famine into Egypt (Genesis, chap. 46). In spite of the subsequent four hundred year enslavement in Egypt, God was faithful to His promise and delivered His people through Moses (Exodus, chaps. 1-12). God's grace gave birth to Israel and nurtured her through her infancy.

As God prepared his people to enter their promised land, He constituted them into a nation by the Mosaic Covenant of Law (Exodus, chaps. 19ff.). Just before they entered the land, the king of Moab wanted to curse Israel through the prophet Balaam, but God would not allow it because of the covenant He made with Abraham (Numbers, chaps. 22-24). While conquest of the land of Canaan came through obedience under Joshua, the nation did not obey completely (Judges, chaps. 1-2), and by the time of the Judges, Israel had degenerated into a lawless divided people where "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). Even so, God's grace preserved them by raising up judges to deliver His people from their enemies (Judg. 2:16-19). During this time, the story of Ruth demonstrates God's unrelenting grace in preserving a faithful few and preparing a lineage that would result in the birth of the Messiah.

Even during the divine discipline of Israel's captivity to Assyria and Babylon, God preserved a faithful remnant according to grace (Rom. 11:1-5). The biblical story of Esther shows how God protected His people in captivity from their enemies. But God did not allow Israel to remain in captivity. Under the Medo-Persians, He brought Israel back to their land to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem (Ezra, Nehemiah). In the time between the Old and New Testaments, God graciously preserved His people from the terrible Seleucid persecutions through the Maccabean rulers (1,2,3 Maccabees). Israel survived its darkest days by the grace of God.

One would think that the murder of their divine Messiah might seal the fate of Israel and push God beyond any limits of His grace, but Jesus Christ forgave His murderers from the cross (Luke 23:34) and promised to return and restore Israel (John 14:1; Acts 3:19-21). For crucifying the Messiah, God chastised His people in A.D. 70 by destroying Jerusalem and dispersing them among the nations of the world. After their stubborn rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God judicially blinded Israel to the truth as He turned to the Gentiles (Acts 28:25-28) and allowed them to enjoy the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant by becoming sons of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:26-4:7). In the new age of the church, Gentiles and Jews became one body in Christ (Eph. 2:11-3:7). Though God instituted the church, He did not turn His back on the nation of Israel or replace Israel with the church (Rom. 3:1-4; 11:1-5). Any such conclusion comes from subjective and arbitrary interpretations of the promises that God made concerning Israel in the Old Testament and underestimates God's unlimited grace.

God's grace in Israel's present.

While some might have been tempted to think that the church replaced Israel because there was no nation from the time of Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70 into the twentieth century, the reemergence of modern Israel

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should put to rest any such notions. In 1948, Israel was allotted their present-day territory, and in 1952 they were formally recognized as a nation. In a short time, this small oil-barren strip of mostly desert surrounded by large oil-rich hostile nations prospered by God's grace into one of the world's leading economic and military powers. Israel has survived relentless terroristic attacks, bombings, and wars, yet she stands today as a testimony to God's unrelenting grace.

God's grace in Israel's future.

The key to Israel's future lies in God's past promises to Abraham and His descendants. Israel has a future of blessing according to the same grace that founded and preserved her. This is amplified in the New Covenant as expounded in Jeremiah 31-33 and Ezekiel 36-37. As a "new" covenant, it replaces the "old" Mosaic Covenant of Law. It does not replace the Abrahamic Covenant, but expands on its promise of blessings. According to the prophets, these blessings include the restoration of Israel as a nation (Jer. 31:35-40; 32:37-41; Eze. 36:22-37:14), the forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and an intimate knowledge of God. The New Covenant is ultimately fulfilled when Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth.

The apostle Paul testified to God's grace toward Israel when he explained the nation's sovereign election and preservation. Paul taught that God's grace toward Israel was not because they earned it; that's not the nature of grace: *And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.* (Rom 11:6)

All Israel will be once and for all restored and delivered from her enemies (Rom. 11:26) simply because the "gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). God will do as He promised. Israel has a future--by God's unconditional, irreversible grace.

Conclusion and implications for Christians.

Someone has quipped "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Indeed! God's sovereign election of Israel was not because she deserved it. *He chose Israel, because He chose Israel*, and in doing so, He displayed to the world His wonderful grace against the backdrop of Israel's dark sinfulness.

God's unrelenting grace toward His people Israel is just as unrelenting toward His people in the church, both Jew and Gentile. The experience of Israel can picture the experience of the individual Christian (1 Cor. 10:1-11; Heb. 3:7-4:10). Christians today have the same assurance of God's blessings because they have become sons of Abraham through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They are covered by the very same grace.

While it is possible for Christians, like Israel, to be unfaithful to God, God will be faithful to Himself and His Word. He cannot deny Himself (Rom. 3:4; 2 Tim. 2:13; Titus 1:2). Christians are secure in the same divine grace that out-measures their sins (Rom. 5:20). This amazing and unrelenting grace should lead Christians to offer themselves to God as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2) and to offer praise to Him (Heb. 13:15-16). God will never give up on His people. Ever.

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