

Israel: Past, Present, and Future #2

Romans 11:28-29

November 12, 2023

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Though there is agreement among Bible-believing Christians over God's call to Israel in the Old Testament to be a covenanted nation, where we find division among Christians and churches appears over whether Israel remains presently and will be in the future God's chosen people, a nation covenanted with God. There are three different positions—one of which most Christians hold (though there may be slight variations within them).

1. Israel is and always will be God's chosen people and covenanted nation with a distinct divine purpose from that of Christ's Church (**Dispensationalism**). This usually includes the rebuilding of the temple with God's blessing and the re-establishing of the priesthood and sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

2. Israel as a chosen people and covenanted nation is and will be in the future fully realized in Christ's Church. The church is the new Israel where there is neither Jew nor Gentile. There is no divine purpose for Israel as a nation now or in the future (**Supersessionism**). The new Israel of Jew and Gentile supersedes and is the fulfillment of all promises of national blessings made to Israel in the Old Testament. No national conversion of Israel.

3. Israel is presently God's enemy and under God's judgment due to its rejection of Jesus, the Messiah; and yet Israel remains a covenanted people (albeit a covenant-breaking people) but will be converted and brought into Christ's Church as a Christian nation in the future, as with all nations of the world (**Covenantalism**). Which of these three positions does the Apostle Paul present to us in Romans 11:28-29?

Our main points are: (1) Israel as a Nation—Presently God's Enemy; (2) Israel as a Nation—Presently God's Elect. Both are true according to the Apostle Paul. They are not contradictory, but complementary. This is true of us as well. Before we were individually converted to Christ we were all God's enemy (Romans 5:10) and yet at the very same time that we were God's enemy, we were God's elect (Ephesians 1:4). Paul says the same thing is true of Israel as a nation: God's enemy as a nation, and yet God's elect as a nation.

I. Israel as a Nation—Presently God's Enemy.

A. A Brief Summary of Romans 11.

1. This is Paul's exposition of Israel's place in God's purpose/plan. In Romans 11, Paul responds to anticipated questions about Israel from Christians in Rome: Roman 11:1,11—Is the fall of Israel final or temporary?

2. Paul states in Romans 11:5 that presently there is a small remnant from Israel according to God's election that are being saved (among whom he includes himself, Romans 11:1), but Paul contrasts that small remnant with the Israel that shall yet be converted to Christ in the future (Romans 11:12,15).

3. Paul illustrates the relationship of Israel to Gentiles in God's plan by way of an olive tree (the olive tree represents Christ's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—the Patriarchs or Jesus being the root of that covenant, Romans 11:28; Romans 15:12; Galatians 3:17). Paul says that certain of the natural branches of Israel were removed from the blessings of God's covenant when they rejected Christ and Gentiles being unnatural branches were grafted into that same olive tree (Matthew 21:43). But the hope of Israel's restoration is in Romans 11:23.

4. Paul states that the blindness/rebellion of Israel will yet be removed (Romans 11:25) and all Israel (that is Israel as a nation that has not been converted shall be saved (Romans 11:26) in fulfillment of God's covenant realized in Christ (Romans 11:27—Jeremiah 31:34).

B. Now Paul moves to answer a possible objection in Romans 11:28 that might arise from among the Gentiles believers in Rome.

1. This is likely the anticipated objection: How can God yet show mercy to the nation of Israel when Israel has rejected and conspired with the Romans to crucify Christ, turned their backs upon the gospel offered to them, and persecuted the apostles/ministers of Christ who preached the gospel to them? Isn't the fact that Israel is Christ's enemy and under God's severe judgment enough to demonstrate that God's redemptive plan for the nation of Israel is already finished? This objection is answered in Romans 11:28.

2. How is Israel the ENEMY of God (at the present time)? Paul says, "AS CONCERNING THE GOSPEL." In other words, as concerning their present rejection of Jesus as Messiah and the gospel of Christ that is preached unto them, they make themselves (collectively) the enemy of God. They oppose God, and therefore God opposes them in their opposition and hatred of Christ and His gospel (which is why Israel is presently under God's judgment as a nation/people in Romans 11:7-10, 15). This is why Jesus brought destruction upon Jerusalem in 70 a.d.

3. But in God's most holy and wise plan, this present Divine judgment upon Israel as God's enemy is for "your sakes" (Romans 11:28), i.e. for the sake of the Gentiles to whom Christ has mercifully turned in drawing them to Himself and grafting them into the olive tree of His gracious covenant to be His people. The rejection of Christ and the gospel by the Jews has (in God's redemptive plan) opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles. Thus, according to Paul, Israel as a people/nation in their present state of unbelief of Christ/gospel are God's enemy—not His friend. They are covenant-breakers.

II. Israel as a Nation—Presently God's Elect.

A. Now to the second part of Paul's response to the same anticipated objection. This is contrasted with the first part ("But").

1. How is Israel as a people/nation BELOVED of God (at the present time)? "BUT AS TOUCHING THE ELECTION" (Romans 11:28). In other words, despite the fact that presently Israel as a nation/people are God's enemy due to their rejection of Christ and His gospel, nevertheless, at the same present time, they are loved due to God having chosen them to be His covenant nation and people (through the fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which we saw in the first sermon). God's election of Israel and the covenant made with the fathers is an election of love. In spite of their rebellion and being the enemy of God, nevertheless, there is yet the love of election through the fathers that rests upon them. Israel has broken covenant with Christ who made the covenant with Abraham (Galatians 3:17), but Christ yet remembers His covenant with Israel.

2. For those who would interpret "ALL ISRAEL" that shall be saved (in Romans 11:26) to be God's elect Church (consisting of Jews and Gentiles), Paul here in Romans 11:28 states that the same Israel that is presently God's enemy is the very same Israel that is presently God's beloved by way of election. The elect remnant of individual Jews that were coming to Christ in Paul's time (Romans 11:5) and are likewise coming to Christ presently cannot be considered God's enemy any longer, for if they have come to Christ they are reconciled to God. Thus, Paul must have in mind in the salvation of ALL ISRAEL those who were in Paul's time and are presently in our time God's enemy because they reject the gospel of Jesus Christ.

B. Note Paul's conclusion in Romans 11:29 ("For").

1. Let's start with the word "calling". This refers to their "election" as a nation to be God's people (Romans 11:28). Once God calls into a covenant relationship a nation to be His people, God will not terminate that covenant with them (they may break it, but He will not). Despite the sin, the hatred, the covenant-breaking and rebellion (even to the point of partaking in the sin of Christ's crucifixion), God will not forget His covenant with Israel. Israel may forget, but God will not forget. The same is true of those nations bound by the Solemn League and Covenant.

2. What does Paul mean by "the gifts" in Romans 11:29? These are all the blessings

associated with God's calling Israel to be His covenant nation/people (these are gifts/blessings that were theirs when they were in the olive tree, but which now are enjoyed by the Gentiles in the New Covenant in Christ which is the realization of the blessings of God's Covenant of Grace with Abraham).

3. Paul says that both the "gifts" (blessings) of God's covenant with Israel and the "calling" to be His people are "without repentance" (i.e. irrevocable; they cannot be changed). The unfaithfulness of Israel will not make God unfaithful to His covenant. That is the position I describe as Covenantalism which is given in Romans 11:28-29.

C. Let me cite just a couple Reformed fathers who held this position and who were not dispensationalists. A future hope of Israel's national conversion did not originate with dispensationalists. However, these Reformed fathers believed converted Israel would be united in the same olive tree—the same gracious covenant and church with Gentile nations—embracing the same doctrine, worship, church government, and discipline—not rebuilding the temple or re-establishing the priesthood, sacrifices, or holy days of the Old Testament. Israel will be a Christian nation, like all of the nations of the world.

1. John Brown of Wamphray (1610-1679) states in his *Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* concerning Romans 11:26 (p. 462),

Then says he, All Israel shall be saved, that is, The whole body of the nation of the Jews shall be brought from under the plague of blindness, under which they lay, and brought under the gospel and the saving ordinances of Christ into a gospel covenant church-state. . .

2. Herman Witsius (1636-1708), that learned and godly divine from the Reformed Church of the Netherlands.

[T]he Jews are in due time to be converted from their rebellion and transgressions... As this is not yet accomplished, as to **the whole body of the Israelites**, and yet the scripture must be fulfilled, the apostle [Paul—GLP] has justly inferred, that in the last times it will be perfectly fulfilled. For, seeing the foundation thereof is God's covenant with Israel, and this is a firm covenant, stable, immutable, and suspended on no ambiguous condition... it is not possible but that everything shall happen exactly, according to the promise and prediction [as found in Romans 11—GLP]. And this is my covenant with them, saith God... All this being addressed to **the whole body of the nation [of Israel—GLP]**, it must of necessity be fulfilled at the appointed time (Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 2:417).

D. The Lord did not go to the palaces of the mightiest nation of the earth to find for Himself a royal bride. Nor did He go to the academies of the greatest nation of the earth to find for Himself a wise bride. Nor did He go to the richest nation of the earth to find for Himself a wealthy bride. Nor did He go to the godliest nation of the earth to find a holy bride. No, the Lord stooped ever so low and set out to woo to Himself an impoverished, idolatrous, obstinate, and enslaved nation.

E. Here is a love story in which the Lord takes a nation to be His bride who from the very beginning is infatuated with other lovers. But out of His own covenant love for His bride, He will not utterly forsake her.

1. The Lord showered Israel with His salvation. He bestowed upon her a land, and gave her good laws to direct her. He appointed her kings (like David) after His own heart to lead her. He mercifully warned her by His prophets that if she continued in her backsliding ways that He would send His judgment upon her.

2. What more could the Lord do to manifest His love for His bride? I'll tell you what more He could do and did to demonstrate His love for His ancient people. He Himself became flesh and dwelt among her, but she even then did not receive Him (John 1:11). He not only sent His ministers to convey His

love to His unfaithful bride, but he came to her in person. He healed her sick, raised her dead, and offered eternal life to her. But what did she do? She joined with Romans to have Him beat, spat upon, mocked with a crown of thorns, and crucified. In return for His love, He received her hatred and scorn.

3. And still our gracious Lord will manifest His covenant love for His ancient people by renewing His Covenant of Grace in the New Covenant with her in the future and granting to her faith, repentance, love, and new obedience. Samuel Rutherford (*Rutherford's Letters*, pp. 122,123) describes Israel's future conversion in these words:

O to see the sight, next to Christ's Coming in the clouds, the most joyful! Our elder brethren the Jews and Christ fall upon one another's necks and kiss each other! They have been long asunder; they will be kind to one another when they meet. O day! O longed-for and lovely day-dawn! O sweet Jesus, let me see that sight which will be as life from the dead, thee and thy ancient people in mutual embraces.

Gracious Lord Jesus, hasten that glorious day!

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