

26. ISRAEL'S CONVERSION

Paul's prophecy in Romans is very relevant here. He told the Roman Christians that Israel had experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles should come to faith, and then, all Israel would be saved, as Isaiah had written: The Deliverer will come from Zion and remove ungodliness from Jacob (Rom 11:25-26). When Jesus returns, the door to the Church will be shut, the full number of Gentiles will have come to faith, and Israel's hardening, which relates to their indifference and obstinacy will end.

Revelation 11 reveals that Israel, as a nation, will be ready for salvation at the Messiah's return. After the two witnesses ascend to heaven and an earthquake flattens one-tenth of Jerusalem, the survivors give glory to God. God will pour out on them a spirit of grace and their hearts of stone will be softened, they will mourn for the one whom their ancestors pierced (Zech 12:10).

The Israelis will be born again of God's Spirit and be grafted back into that olive tree which symbolizes God's Spirit-filled people. It does not symbolize the kingdom; that right was forfeited by Israel and transferred to the Church.

Several events will take place between Jesus' return and Israel's conversion:

- Resurrection and rapture of the Church
- Jesus' descent to the Mount of Olives
- His enthronement in the temple on Mount Zion
- Worldwide earthquakes and destruction
- Jesus' victory over the nations at Armageddon
- Satan's arrest and imprisonment

Jeremiah made the classic OT prophecy of Israel's future conversion and it was confirmed by Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah.

Jer 31:33-34 This is how my commitment with Israel will be after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. None of them will teach their neighbor, no one will tell his comrade to know

the Lord for they will all know me, both young and old. I, the Lord, declare, I will forgive them their evil deeds and will remember their sins no more.

The Lord seals this commitment with an oath:

Jer 31:36-37 Only if these decrees are removed from my care will the descendants of Israel ever cease from being a nation under my care. Only if the heavens above can be measured and Earth's foundations below be explored will I reject the descendants of Israel because of what they have done.

Ezek 36:24-28 I will gather you from the nations and take you out of all the countries and bring you back into your land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will become clean; I will decontaminate you from all your defilements and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart that is hard like stone and give you a soft heart. And I will put my Spirit in you and cause you to follow my decrees and carefully keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors. You will be my people, and I will be your God.

Ezek 37:23-28 They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and the things that I hate and their other offenses, for I will guard them so that they will no longer disobey me and sin against me. I will cleanse them and they'll be my people and I'll be their God. My servant, a descendant of David, will be their king, and they'll all have one shepherd. They'll follow my laws and carefully keep my decrees. They'll live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and my servant, a descendant of David, will be their king forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them, an everlasting covenant. I'll establish them and increase their numbers, and I'll put my temple among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them. I'll be their God and they'll be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my temple is among them forever.

Ezek 39:28-29 Then they will know that I am the Lord their God. Even though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will bring

them out of there and gather them to their own land. None of them will be left behind. I'll no longer hide my face from Israel, for I'll pour out my Spirit on them. I the Sovereign Lord have spoken.

Joel 2:28-32 Later on, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. I will pour out my Spirit in those days even on my male and female servants. I will show wonders in the sky and on Earth; there will be blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will go dark and the moon will turn red like blood before the arrival of the great and dreadful Day of the Lord. And it will happen that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved, for there will be a remnant in Jerusalem and on Mount Zion, as the Lord has promised; that is, those among the survivors whom the Lord has called.

Zech 12:10 I will pour out my Spirit on David's descendants and the people of Jerusalem and they will understand my grace and pray to me and look on me, the one they pierced and killed. They will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, they will grieve for him as one grieves the death of a firstborn son (Cf. Mt 24:30, Rev 1:7).

Zech 13:1 At that time a fountain will be opened to the house of David's descendants and the people of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.

These promises concerning the conversion of Israel have never been fulfilled. As a nation, they have remained in unbelief since Jesus revealed himself to them. Their conversion will happen soon in these last days, now that Israel is once again living in their promised land. The greater son of David will be there for them. Their salvation as a nation is a separate act of grace from that of the Church. Born-again members of the universal Church have the promise of becoming heirs of the Messianic kingdom, and that includes Jewish believers. But when all Israel is saved, their promises which must be fulfilled are earthly. All the land promised to Abraham and Jacob will become theirs, and God's temple will once again be built in Jerusalem. The nations will come to worship the Lord in Israel, and world leaders will bring their wealth to Jerusalem as offerings to the Lord.

Israel's future conversion will be a national phenomenon and a prophet like Elijah will prepare the way. The last two verses of the OT predict the coming of Elijah before the great and awesome day of the Lord arrives (Mal 4:5-6). This is not the prophet Elijah who didn't die but was taken to heaven in a chariot, but a reformer, similar to Elijah, who called the people to repentance and worked powerful miracles among them. An angel of the Lord alluded to this passage in Malachi when he told Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, that his son would go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to prepare the people to be ready for the Lord (Lk 1:17).

Jesus said that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come (Mt 11:14), but he also said: Elijah is indeed coming first and will restore all things (Mk 9:12). John the Baptist's ministry was not the complete fulfillment of this prophecy. God will send Elijah before the great and awesome day of the Lord arrives. This prophecy was only partly fulfilled by John the Baptist; its true fulfillment will be fulfilled in the latter years before the Messiah's return.

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Zechariah all prophesy that the Lord will pour out his Spirit on Israel in the last days so that the whole nation is converted. But before receiving the Spirit, there needs to be repentance and a seeking of the Lord.

The Lord brought Israel back from her 70-year exile in Babylon, and many believe the promise that Israel will once again seek the Lord and find him, when they seek him with all their heart, just as Hosea prophesied:

For the Israelites will live many days without king or leader, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without diviners or household priests. Later on, the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and their king, a descendant of David. In the last days, they will be in awe of the Lord and his blessings (Hos 3:4-5).

The majority of Jews are still living in unbelief, they have not recognized that Jesus is "David" their king. Hosea promises that they will recognize him in the last days.

Israel as a nation will be converted, but they will not be part of the Church or inherit the Messianic kingship, because their ancestors forfeited their right to the kingship when they rejected Jesus (Matt 22:1-10, Luke 14:15-24). Israel's conversion will follow the

resurrection of the righteous. Individual Jews who convert before the Messiah returns are part of the Church and will rule with the Messiah from New Jerusalem in the sky.

Ezekiel said that the Lord will gather Israel from the peoples and assemble them out of the countries where they were scattered and he'll give them the land of Israel. He'll give them one heart and he'll put a new spirit within them. The only indication of time here is that it is after Israel has returned to their land.

When the Messiah returns on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, there are three important historical events to accomplish:

1. the glorification of the Church; the resurrection of the righteous dead and the rapture of the living saints
2. the defeat of the Antichrist and the world's armies that are laying siege to Jerusalem, giving victory to Israel
3. Israel's mass conversion as a nation

Israel will see the Lord's glorious return and mourn in repentance for the one their ancestors "pierced". They will be conscious of what the two witnesses preached to them in Jerusalem during the last three and a half years, and how they were vindicated and brought back to life after the Antichrist put them to death. The whole nation will be marvelously saved as the Messiah pours his Spirit upon them.

Ezekiel speaks of the Messianic reign when he says that God will make his holiness and reputation known among his people Israel and won't let his holiness be profaned anymore. Even the nations will learn that the Lord (the Messiah) is holy in Israel (Ezek 39:7-8). Pay attention, the Lord says, it is coming and will certainly happen. This is the day about which he has spoken! The day of the great earthquake, when the mountains are thrown down, and when the nations under Gog are defeated.

The Messiah will be king over Israel, and they will live according to God's rules. They, with their children and grandchildren, will live forever in the land that God gave Jacob, the land where their ancestors lived. The Lord will establish them, increase their population, and place his temple among them so that the nations will understand that he has set Israel apart from them.

Joel said the Lord would pour his Spirit on all flesh. He was thinking primarily about Judah, the "all" meaning both men and women, slave

and free, old and young. The following phrases “your sons and daughters”, “your old men” and “your young men” show that he regarded the recipients of the Spirit to be a future generation of Israel. This was partially fulfilled at Pentecost where the converts were Jews, but as the Hebrew context suggests, the final fulfillment will be on the great and terrifying day of the Lord: I will display wonders in the heavens, and on Earth: blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will darken and the moon will turn red like blood, before the arrival of the great and terrifying day of the Lord (Joel 2:30-31). Many commentaries suggest that the darkening of the sun and moon relate to the crucifixion but the mention of “blood, fire and columns of smoke” and especially the phrase “Day of the Lord” indicate that Joel’s prophecy is to do with the end of the age, as indeed is his whole book. The preceding verses describe a restoration of Israel. God will no longer make them a reproach among the nations, and they will never again be ashamed.

Zechariah says the Messiah will pour out his Spirit on David’s descendants and the people of Jerusalem so that when they look on him whom their ancestors pierced, they will mourn for him. At that time, a fountain will be opened for them and they will be cleansed from sin and impurity. In the whole land two-thirds of the people will die but the remaining third will survive and be refined, tested as if through fire, and they will become God’s people.

Hosea *On that day* Israel will call God her husband and idolatry will finally cease to exist. God will betroth Israel to himself forever. They will know him, and their relationship will be based on righteousness, justice, love, mercy, and faithfulness (Hos 2:16-20).

The final seven years of this age will give Israel and Jerusalem great prominence. Israel is already counted among the top ten most powerful nations. During the millennium, the Messiah will be king over the whole Earth, and the resurrected Church will reign with him over the survivors of the Great Tribulation. Israel will be one of the nations of the Earth but recognized as the Messiah’s people.

Over centuries past there have been opposing views about the Jewish Messianic expectation. Older commentators lived in an era that preceded the return of the Jews from all over the world to form the new state of Israel in 1948 and to take control of Jerusalem again in 1967 after nearly two thousand years of oppression. Before the return, it was difficult for these older commentators to believe it could

happen, and so they interpreted these prophecies about Israel as having been fulfilled in the Church. In addition, there has been historically a considerable anti-Jewish sentiment that badly biased Christian commentaries. Now, with the Jews restored to their land and the increasing prominence of Israel on the world stage, the promises that they would be converted in the last days and that Jerusalem would become the center of the world under their Messiah, are no longer incredible. Liberals teach that the rule of Christ in the hearts of believers has replaced the old idea of a Messianic kingdom on Earth, but that teaching has no scriptural basis. No verse of Scripture says or implies that the Kingdom of God is simply the rule of Christ in peoples' lives.

The prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah, a glorified Jerusalem, and the conversion of Israel are clearly and amply confirmed in both the OT and the NT. Israel will one day turn to the Lord *en masse*, but not before Jesus returns and the resurrection of the Church takes place. Israel will enter the millennium as mortal survivors of the Great Tribulation, not as part of the resurrected Church. In their rejection of Jesus at his first coming, they forfeited their right to the kingdom, so that when the Messiah rules the world with his resurrected saints, only a small percentage of them will be Jewish. The nation of Israel, however, will be God's special people on Earth during the millennium. God's call is irrevocable. They will be converted after Jesus' return, and every Jew still living among the nations will return to Israel. God will be vindicated as the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus the Messiah who will rule the Earth as God's regent: the King of kings and Lord of lords.

When the Deliverer comes from Zion and banishes ungodliness from Jacob, then all Israel will be saved (Rom 11:26). It is not only the Jews living in Israel who are saved but every Jew on the planet. There are an estimated 15.7 million Jews in the world today, including 7.2 million in Israel and 6.3 million in the US. After the Messiah returns to Zion and defeats the surrounding armies, he will pour out his Spirit on all the surviving inhabitants of Jerusalem and Israel and gather those who remain from among the nations.

There is a moment when the door to the Church is shut. It is when the dead in Christ are resurrected and the living saints are raptured, all in the twinkling of an eye. After meeting the Lord in the air, this great multitude of resurrected believers, including born-again Messianic

Jews, will follow Jesus to the Mount of Olives from where he will enter the temple in Jerusalem and be enthroned as the Messiah.

Zechariah 12 is a prophecy: The word of the Lord concerning Israel. The following verses describe the siege of Jerusalem when *all* the nations of the Earth will be gathered against her. On that day, the Lord will miraculously deliver Jerusalem and Judah and a remnant of Israel, and he will destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem. After this battle, the Lord will pour out on surviving Israel a spirit of grace and supplication and they will look on him, the one their ancestors pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child. ... On that day a fountain will be opened for Israel to cleanse them from sin and impurity (Zech 12:10-11, 13:1). This prophesy is fulfilled when Jesus returns: Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even (or namely) those who pierced him, and *all the tribes of the land* will mourn because of him (Rev 1:7).

Jesus used the same phrase in Matthew 24:29–31. After the troubles of those days, the sun and moon will be darkened, the powers of heaven will be shaken loose, the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then ‘all the tribes of the land’ (NIV alternate translation to ‘all the peoples of the Earth’), will mourn when they see him coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. He will send out his angels with a loud trumpet blast, and they will gather his elect from one end of heaven to the other (Mt 24:29–31). His elect are his followers (Mt 24:22, 24, 31), not Israel.

The timing of Israel’s conversion is important. If they were converted before Jesus’ return, they would be part of the Church, as many Jews have done over the centuries. We live in the age of grace, from Pentecost to the Second Coming, wherein people of every tribe and language are invited to put their faith in Jesus Christ, to be born again and to be united to Christ. But when Jesus arrives, the door is shut (Mt 25:11–12, Lk 13:25-29). While Jesus is in the air, the believers are raptured and rise to meet the Lord in the air in the twinkling of an eye. From that point on they are forever with the Lord. No Scriptures say that believers go to heaven at this time. The Lord’s activity for the following thousand years is to rule the Earth and the raptured believers will reign with him. Their home will be in New Jerusalem, a heavenly city that comes down out of heaven from God to the Earth.

Israel’s conversion will occur later, after the Lord descends to Earth on the Mount of Olives, after he is enthroned in the temple (Ezek 43),

and after he gives victory to Israel at the battle of Armageddon. The Messiah will come from Zion and turn godlessness away from Jacob. Having seen the one their ancestors crucified coming in great power and glory to save them, they will respond with great mourning. They will be born again of the Holy Spirit. John sees Jesus coming in the clouds, and he says that every eye will see him (Rev 1:7), even (or namely) those who pierced him, and all *the tribes of the land will mourn because of him*. This is precisely what Zechariah predicted. Each family of Israel will mourn separately, wailing in repentance, because they will now recognize the crime their nation committed when they crucified Jesus the Messiah. The tribes who mourn refer to the tribes of Israel because that is the import of Zechariah's prophecy. In Revelation, the response of unbelievers to these last-day events is only to curse God, not to mourn (Rev 16:9, 11, 21). They are certainly not beating their breasts in sorrow.

The book of Revelation is written to Christians, the seven churches of Asia, so, it does not say much about Israel during the Great Tribulation. Only the New Jerusalem is referred to specifically, not the earthly city, except in Revelation 11:2, 8, where it is referred to as "the Holy City" and then "the great city that is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified."

Israel's conversion occurs after the resurrection and rapture of the church, too late for them to be included among the saints who are resurrected at the Lord's return. Paul said that they would not be converted until *after* the full number of Gentiles comes to faith (Rom 11:25). They will be among the survivors of the Great Tribulation and will continue to live normal lives on earth. At least half the population of the world will be destroyed during this terrible time when powerful earthquakes cause the cities of the nations to collapse (Rev 16:18–19). Together with Israel, the survivors of the nations will be the *subjects* of the Messianic kingdom. The resurrected saints, on the other hand, are royal family, who will reign with Christ. All Israel will be saved, so the Messiah will reign over his people Israel for the first time as a redeemed and obedient nation. The nations are unbelieving survivors from the destruction of the world and will be ruled with a rod of iron. They will go to Jerusalem to worship the King year by year, under threat of punishment if they do not do so.

OT prophecies of Israel's future conversion confirmed in the NT

Many OT prophets predict Israel's future conversion. The NT is not written for Israel, but to the Church, so we don't expect there to be so many prophecies there concerning Israel. However, there is enough to confirm that what was promised in the OT has not been annulled. Israel has not been replaced by the Church. Replacement theology is not Biblical. Paul is very emphatic that the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. As far as election is concerned, the Jews are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. Thousands of Jews became Christians in the first century and there are many becoming Christians today, but these conversions do not fulfill the promises for national Israel. God still has a plan for Israel as a nation, in fact, the whole concept of the Messiah and a Messianic kingdom is Jewish. When Jesus rules the world on his return, he will do so from Jerusalem with the nation of Israel as his nation on Earth.

When Jesus spoke about the signs of the end of this age and the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24, he said that the sign of the Son of Man would appear in the sky and all the *tribes* of the *land* would mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. His coming on the clouds is an obvious reference to Daniel 7:13-14, from where the "Son of Man" expression arose. The Ancient of Days will give him authority, glory, and sovereign power (kingship), with the result that all nations and peoples of every language will worship him. His dominion is everlasting and his kingdom will never be destroyed. The alternate NIV translation "all the tribes of the land" is the better translation because it is an allusion to Zechariah 12:10-12 where the Lord pours out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication and they will look on him whom they have pierced and mourn for him as one mourns for an only child. The land will mourn, each clan by itself. 'Land' and 'Earth' are the same words in both Hebrew and Greek. When Jesus returns, what tribes are going to mourn for the one their ancestors pierced, if it is not Israel? Three times in Revelation 16 we are told that the unbelievers will curse God in response to the plagues they were suffering. It is only Israel who will mourn for him because it is the time for their conversion. èè

Romans 11

In Paul's three-chapter discussion of Israel in Romans 9–11, he states that stubbornness will be upon Israel until the full number of converts from other nations comes to faith. He explains that not all who are descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob belong to Israel. Ishmael was a son of Abraham, but his descendants were not chosen. Esau was a son of Isaac, but his descendants were not chosen either. Even the bulk of the Israelites were disobedient and God had to judge them.

Then, Paul says in chapter 11 that one day all Israel will be saved, just as the prophets said they would. The Deliverer will come from Zion and remove ungodliness from Jacob (Rom 11:25–27). Salvation came to the Gentiles, to make Israel jealous. God's chosen people are likened to an olive tree. He chose Israel as his people, but because of disobedience, some of the branches were broken off, and the Gentiles were grafted in. Then Paul says, that if the Jews do not continue in their unbelief, God has the power to graft them in again. A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the full number of Gentiles has been saved. When the time comes for them to repent, all Israel will be saved. Paul said if their disobedience resulted in riches for the Gentiles, their full inclusion will result in many more blessings. All Israel means the full number of Israelites alive at that time. The Messiah will rule from Jerusalem over his redeemed nation Israel, and from there his reign of peace and righteousness will extend to all nations. Concerning the gospel, the Jews were enemies of the early Church, and throughout the centuries there has always been a certain amount of anti-Semitism, even in the Church and among its theologians. But concerning election, Israel is beloved for the sake of the patriarchs. God's gifts and calling are irrevocable. When the Messiah returns, they will receive mercy. They will repent. They will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and they will be saved.

Revelation 11

The book of Revelation does not say much about Israel. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Jews were scattered throughout the world. The general feeling probably was that the Jews as a nation of God's people were finished and if individuals sought salvation, they would have to become Christians. But what about all those OT prophecies about the Messiah and his reign over a restored Israel? The apostle John, in a vision (Rev 11), was given a measuring

rod and asked to measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but not to measure the court outside the temple, because it had been given over to the nations and they would trample the holy city for forty-two months (the final period before the Messiah returns). During that time, the Lord's two witnesses will preach in the city "where their Lord was crucified." They are clothed in sackcloth because they are calling Israel to repentance. They have the power to consume their enemies with fire and to shut the sky so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, akin to things that the prophet Elijah did. Many see these two witnesses as representing Moses and Elijah, the Elijah whom Malachi prophesied, who would come before the great and awesome Day of the Lord. The witnesses are eventually killed by the 'beast,' the Antichrist who is the world ruler, the 'little horn' of Daniel 7:8, 21. He will wage war on the saints and conquer them.

When God brings the witnesses back to life, there is a great earthquake. One-tenth of Jerusalem falls and seven thousand people are killed. The clue to the significance of these events is that the rest of the people in Jerusalem were terrified and gave glory to God, an idiom for repentance. They are ready to receive the Spirit which will soon be poured out on them by the returning Messiah. Those who repent are the Jews who can no longer follow the Antichrist who prevented the daily sacrifice being offered in their temple, set himself up as God, and killed the two witnesses who preached in Jerusalem for 3 ½ years. Their response of repentance is in deep contrast to that of the unbelievers who worship the Antichrist and take his mark on their bodies and whose only response to the plagues is to curse God (Rev 9:20, 16:9, 11, 21).