

SESSION 10: WHY ISRAEL?

This session is about Israel and Israel's purpose in the plan of God. This special nation, especially chosen by God and to whom the entire Old Testament was written, has a special place in God's great story!

As we have previously discussed, God's before-the-world-began dream got a restart following the fall of Adam and Eve with the calling of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were to be the founding parents of a new creation of humanity. Through them, God was getting his creation project back on track!

Abraham and Sarah were, of course, still part of Adam's fallen race, but this would be taken care of with the coming of the promised savior, who would do away with all the evil and destructive consequences of the 'fall.' He would also be the 'last Adam' and the 'second man,' and usher in the reality of this new humanity, and for all eternity! (Jn1:29, 1Co 15:45, 15:47)

Abraham and Sarah's family grew into families, and then into clans, and eventually into the nation, Israel. Most of the Old Testament is a record of Israel's story and thus plays a significant part in God's larger story.

Tragically, many Christians have yet to grasp the connection between Israel and this larger narrative. In fact, many wonder why Israel was necessary in the first place. For many years I was one of those Christians. In the church where I was saved, there seemed to be little mention of Israel's purpose in the plan of God, apart from providing the Jewish biological connection with Abraham to the savior, Jesus. Many of us had a little pocket New Testament which seemed to, quite adequately, provide us with everything we needed to know about our salvation!

And so we must ask a crucial question: "Why Israel?" What does Israel have to do with the global and eternal purpose and plan of God!

Well, Israel's purpose as a nation began with Moses, the Exodus, and a covenant that God made with Israel, at Mount Sinai (Ex 19-24). Through this covenant, Israel became God's representatives—the people through whom he would bring salvation to the world and God's blessing to all the nations of the world.

Here are five stand-out characteristics of Israel's significance:

Firstly, through Israel, God was putting his Kingdom on display, to all the nations of the world. Through Israel God was saying, this is what my Kingdom looks like!

God says in Isa 49:3 "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

And how would God do this?

Firstly, God would accomplish this through the law. Paul says in Romans 2:20 that the law was the embodiment of knowledge and truth. Moses, in giving the law to the nation of Israel, said in Deuteronomy 4:5, "Observe them carefully (that is, the law), for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'"

Secondly, God would accomplish this through his presence with his people.

Moses, in addressing the Israelites, said in Deuteronomy 4:7, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"

Moses understood that God's presence with his people would differentiate them from every other nation.

Exodus 33:14-16 records an interesting conversation between God and Moses. The Lord said to Moses, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

Moses replied, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

The second major characteristic was that, through Israel, God was demonstrating to all the nations the way back to God and his presence, following the fall and the banishment from the Garden of Eden.

Israel was given systems and requirements that showed—not only to them but to all the nations—God's requirements for reconciliation, worship and service.

The sacrificial system, for example, demonstrated that reconciliation required the shedding of blood. The fact that these sacrifices were repeated over and over demonstrated that the shedding of the blood of animals was only a temporary solution. (Heb 7:27, 10:11)

The offerings, including the ordinance of tithing, demonstrated the stewardship of Man's life before God.

The feasts or festivals demonstrated that all good things come from above and thankfulness to God was an important act of humility and dependence on him!

All these systems of sacrifices, offerings, feasts and festivals were 'sign posts' pointing both Israel and all the nations towards God!

It's important to note that there seems to be no indication that Israel was meant to 'go to the nations,' as we have God's chosen people doing in the New Testament. The nations were supposed to come (as we see them doing, at least initially, under Solomon's reign 1Kgs 4:34). In fact, the Jewish interpretation of Genesis 12:3 was always in the 'reflexive tense' which reads, "and all the families of the earth will find blessing in you."¹ And God made this connection as clear as possible by placing Israel at the center of the world's three main continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Thirdly, it was through Israel that the savior would come for the whole world.

Salvation, as Jesus reminded the Samaritans, was from the Jews (Jn 4:22). Jesus was the descendent of Abraham and the descendent of David (Mt 1:1). He was the promised One who would bring both salvation, to the world and also establish God's Kingdom throughout all the earth (Ga 3:16, Dan 2:35, Rev 11:15)!

Fourthly, through Israel, God was gathering into one people, the sin of the entire world, in order to bring judgement upon sin and do away with it forever—not just for Israel but for the entire world.

This is a little more difficult to comprehend but it is an important and powerful truth.

Paul refers to himself as the worst of all sinners (1 Ti 1:15-16). Israel was the same: the most sinful of all the nations (2 Chron 33:9).

One of the reasons that Israel was given the law was to magnify sin. Paul says, in Romans 7:7-8 "...I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law..... But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead."

And in Romans 5:20, Paul says, "The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase."

No other nation had the written law of God, only Israel and only through Israel, therefore, could God bring the utter sinfulness of the sin of the world to a head, in order to judge sin and do away with it, forever.

Professor N.T Wright explains this with the illustration of a bomb squad. When an undetonated bomb is discovered in a community, the bomb squad is called in. They carefully remove the bomb and take it away to a remote place and safely detonate it, thus removing its danger to the community.

This was what Israel was supposed to do. The sinfulness of the world that had by now been identified and accumulated in Israel, through the law and Israel's response to it, was supposed to be taken outside the city to a place called Calvary, and there safely done away with, in Christ.

But what if—Professor Wright continues—what if the bomb squad becomes proud of their vocation, and instead of doing away with the bomb, they kept it to themselves? If they are not careful, the bomb could explode in their faces, and that's exactly what happened, he says, with their rejection of their Messiah, Jesus! But the fact remains that the sin of the world was done away with, in Christ, at Calvary!

And the fifth major significance of Israel is that, through Israel, God would bring this age—Adam's age—to an end, and inaugurate the age of his new world.

Israel, the nation, lost its inheritance—its vocation of bearing the fruit of 'blessed nations' to God. This downward spiral began through Solomon's idolatry and climaxed in their exile to Babylon.

This was confirmed by Jesus in Matthew 21:43, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

Election was never elitism. It was for the purpose of bearing fruit to God, and that fruit was God's Kingdom blessing to the nations of the world. Israel can be likened to the prodigal son: Israel squandered and forfeited the inheritance, but would be reconciled back to the father. They will one day receive both the ring, the robe and the sandals. Israel as a nation will be restored, as Paul says in Romans 11:15, "For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world (New Testament age), what will their acceptance be, but life from the dead?"

Moreover, Israel will participate along with all the other blessed nations of the world in God's new world (Rev 21:24,26, 22:2), where the nations, now reconciled to God, and healed by the leaves of the tree of life, now walk by the light of the glory of God!

At the end of the age, when Christ returns with his holy people (1Thes 3:13)—that is, both Jews and Gentiles in Christ—and with the holy angels (Mt 25:31), Israel will look upon him whom they have pierced (Rev 1:7), and say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." As Jesus stated in Matthew 23:38-39, "Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Israel, having tired of feeding the hogs and feeding on the scraps, will repent and finally realize what they have forfeited, which would be the adoption, the divine glory, the covenants, the law, the temple worship and the promises (Ro 9:4-5). They will return to Yahweh and be welcomed with open arms, and given the best robe, a ring and sandals, accompanied by a celebration party! Israel is now the prodigal son returning! (Lk 15:11-32)

What their role will be in God's new world, we will have to wait and see, but the role of the heir, the first-born, the inheritance, will be given to another. And this is what we will be turning our attention to in our future sessions!

¹ Genesis 12:3 [New American Bible Revised Edition, \(NABRE\)](#)

3 I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.

12:3 Will find blessing in you: the Hebrew conjugation of the verb here and in [18:18](#) and [28:14](#) can be either reflexive (“shall bless themselves by you” = people will invoke Abraham as an example of someone blessed by God) or passive (“by you all the families of earth will be blessed” = the religious privileges of Abraham and his descendants ultimately will be extended to the nations).

In [22:18](#) and [26:4](#), another conjugation of the same verb is used in a similar context that is undoubtedly reflexive (“bless themselves”).

Many scholars suggest that the two passages in which the sense is clear should determine the interpretation of the three ambiguous passages: the privileged blessing enjoyed by Abraham and his descendants will awaken in all peoples the desire to enjoy those same blessings. Since the term is understood in a passive sense in the New Testament ([Acts 3:25](#); [Gal 3:8](#)), it is rendered here by a neutral expression that admits of both meanings.