

# The Millennium

## Why We Believe In a Future Kingdom Ruled by Christ on this Earth

In Zechariah chapters 12-14 there is an incredulous story about a swift revival that God would orchestrate in Jerusalem among Israelites by His sovereign and gracious hand. This story is typical of a number of prophecies which project a future work of God in Israel. (See for example Jeremiah 31:35-37). Taken together, such Scriptures constitute an enormous weight of evidence in favor of the idea that God has not yet accomplished all He has planned for this people called Israel. The question is, are these prophecies speaking of ethnic Israel, or is the term Israel a metaphor which speaks symbolically of another people group? The volume of testimony regarding "Israel" is so great that we must render a verdict regarding the identity of these people that occupy such a significant role in God's plan for the ages.

Historically, most Christians have chosen to understand such testimony as being fulfilled through a remnant of the nation of Israel combined with a large number of Gentiles. Together these constitute a body of chosen ones known as the "elect" or the "church." They are a spiritual Israel of sorts. This kingdom is spiritual by nature, but will have concrete and more visible form when God creates a new heaven and earth, and Christ rules as king over that earth inhabited by the elect from all ages. According to this position, the projections of future world prominence for Israel metaphorically point to the eventual reality of the kingdom of the elect on the new earth. One of the first Christian thinkers to articulate thought in this direction was Augustine in his work The City of God. That is a work which continues to impact Christian thinkers to this day.

Along the way a much smaller number of Christians have chosen to believe that at some point in future time God will orchestrate a spiritual revival among ethnic Israelites. It will occur at the time when Christ returns physically to this earth. This revival will follow the script of Zechariah 12-14, and will result in the conversion of many on the earth. The eventual result will be that Christ, with the elect of all ages, will rule the present creation from the actual land of Israel. They will rule over the inhabitants of the earth who, with Israel, have come to recognize the identity of the one "they have pierced" (Zach. 12:10).

There is a considerable weight of evidence in favor of this later position in terms of the actual statements of Scripture. The position is favored as well in terms of what is implicit in Scripture. There is other motivation to embrace this position which is less weighty, being of a more pastoral and philosophical nature, but is still of value to mention in passing. The purpose of this publication is to present a shred of this evidence so as to call all those who care, to examine the matter more closely.

A statement of Scripture that is critical in the shaping of our understanding of future events is found in Romans 11:11. There, speaking of ethnic Israel, Paul writes, "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall did they? May it never be! (NASB). There may be difference of opinion as to how to interpret Paul's question. But his answer is very clear—NO! So we have definitive information here, we need only to establish the precise meaning of the question.

We begin by confirming who “they” who have stumbled are. Paul has just spoken of the judgmental hardening of the non-elect among ethnic Israelites. He has said that they are in a state of spiritual stupor in which they cannot come to believe in Christ. He has stated this as he is reaching toward a conclusion of a discussion that he began in 9:1. The subject of that discussion is ethnic Israel, his “brothers according to the flesh.” So in speaking of Israel, he is not speaking here of spiritual Israel, but of ethnic Israel. It is apparent then that “they” are unbelieving, ethnic Israelites, being addressed as a group or a unit.

What does Paul mean by “stumbling so as to fall”? These have obviously fallen in terms of salvation, since Paul has clearly stated that his prayer for them is for their salvation. So they are clearly “lost” to use our terminology. What then is left that they might have fallen from? The answer can only be that he is speaking of falling from the privilege he outlined at the start of the discussion in chapter 9. There he states concerning ethnic Israel that “theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises, theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.” What he is summarizing there is not something that conveys personal salvation to everyone who can trace their ethnic roots to the patriarchs. Yet he is clearly stating that this ethnic group has some special privilege in the mind of God.

How are we to understand this privilege? It is the privilege of revelation, the fact that these great truths had been ingrained and illustrated in their culture. It is the privilege of being an illustration for all other peoples of God’s sovereign grace and love. These truths in this sense are the possession of Israel and with them an assigned role in God’s plan. They are a people through whom God has chosen to reveal Himself to the rest of humanity. In this role they are both recipients and instruments of revelation to the world. They are the means by which the world learns of God’s grace and severity. We must not make the frequent mistake of thinking that this privilege of Israel’s was that all of them were individually recipients of salvation by mere ethnicity. Rather, they were God’s primary vehicle of revealing Himself more fully to His creation.

Paul’s question in Romans 11:11 relates to this assigned role in the gracious plan of God. Have they fallen from playing a central role in God’s demonstration of His sovereign lovingkindness and faithfulness? Is their transgression and rebellion so great that the role projected for them has been forfeited? Have they fallen from that future privilege? This is the question to which his answer is an emphatic “No!” The words that conclude his discussion of Israel take a decidedly futuristic bent as the chapter continues, until he states in words that parallel those of Zechariah that “all Israel will be saved,” and that “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.”

The idea that there is a future for ethnic Israel, a group who will be brought to faith by God’s sovereign power at a precise moment in human history, stands up to scrutiny from an exegetical viewpoint. It does not demand that we accept the various timetables and

schemes of interpretations that have thus far been set forth. All of these can be accepted or rejected based on their own merit.

There are a number of things explicitly taught in Scripture which are plainly stated as purposes of God in this creation. A spiritual revival and a restoration of Israel brought about by God's grace would add great drama to the final testimony of earth history regarding its Creator. Consider the following ideas. We know that God wishes by His workings in the history of this planet to reveal His complete sovereignty (1 Cor. 15:28). That He would complete a work so thoroughly derailed by the forces of evil and bring about belief in Christ among a race so anti-Christ, would completely deflate his detractor's arguments (Is. 45:23-24). We know that God wishes to magnify His grace and demonstrate it to all creation (Psa. 145:8-13). That He would extend such grace to a stubborn, stiff-necked people whom He himself assigned the name "he fights with God," would demonstrate the boundlessness of His grace (Ez. 20:32-38). We know that God wants to make the full extent of his power known to all creation (Psa. 33:8-11). That He could righteously and justly deliver the predicted outcome of promises made to Abraham regarding a specific land mass on this planet, in spite of all the power of hell, would be a dramatic statement of His transcendent power over all that is (Is.44:6-8; Jer 23:7-8; 32:36-44). It is easy to see how thoroughly and completely the character of God would be revealed through such an ending so that the present earth would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord (Hab. 2:12-14).

In the current mindset of the church, matters of eschatology are thought to be secondary. Many have suggested that they are of little pastoral significance. In the thought of the New Testament, eschatology was the source of hope and comfort in the uncertainties of life (1 Cor 15:58, 1 Thess 4:18, 2 Thess 2:13-15). In terms of the felt needs of those in our churches from week to week, there may be no more important issue than to have within oneself a theology that gives hope. Now, there is great hope in the day when God judges good and evil and we inherit eternal life. But there is an added element to look forward to if there is a literal reign of Christ on this earth. If there is such a reign, it means that all who have placed their faith in Christ will experience ruling with Christ over this earth. They will reign victoriously with Him over the same earth they lived on. They will see evil corralled in the very places where they experienced its pain and grief. They will see the ruins of kingdoms that crushed them in full subjection to the one they served. They will walk in triumph on the earth that once resisted their every thought. They will see justice, truth, righteousness fill the planet that had been marred by sin. It will be a grand victory on the enemy's home court. While it is certainly true that the new heaven and earth will be our ultimate reward, the fact that truth and justice are served within our present arena would be especially gratifying, particularly to those who suffered for their faith. It is comforting and of great hope to imagine the only earth we really know, in a completely different light.

Closely related to the pastoral issues are certain philosophical matters which are raised if there is no rule of Christ on this earth. Chief among these is the purpose of this present creation. What is its value, worth and function in God's plan to bring glory to Himself? No one would suggest that its purpose is to reflect the ability of the destroyer to undo

God's good creation. Yet, if that creation is never to be freed from the futility it was subjected to, if its destiny is simply to get worse and worse until it is destroyed and God starts over, has that not been its only use? Is this really to become a creation that becomes unredeemable due to the power of evil? Or is the purpose of this creation to show the Creator's sovereignty even over evil? Destroying the present creation would demonstrate God's sovereignty over it. Dealing decisively and visibly with evil in it, and ruling as king over it would prove not only His sovereignty but also His grace and mercy in executing His rule. The coming of Christ to this earth to rule it would demonstrate His ability to bring to nothing all the schemes of the evil one to pervert and destroy God's good creation.

It seems that in the interest of aligning ourselves with Scripture, the need of the hour is to divorce ourselves from emotionally charged terms that have become part of this debate. This is not a call to endorse the present state of Israel, to accept dispensationalism, or to deny covenant theology or what is classically referred to as reform theology. It is very possible to embrace a future for the nation of Israel with a variety of views on these subjects.

This is a call to consider how our eschatology might enhance the reputation of God by complimenting all that the rest of our theology purports to be true of His character. We must continually bear in mind that the name Israel means "He fights with God." There is in the story of Israel a story of God's grace and sovereignty that is lengthy and powerful. It is an illustration of the unconditional nature of election, and of the depravity of man. As many have observed, the nation that bore the solution to the problem of evil also perfectly illustrated evil's power. God in dealing with them demonstrates with precision both His sovereignty and His grace. We squander a great illustration of all that separates God from creation, and the very things that bring Him great glory when we cut short and assign an ending to His gracious dealings with the Israelites, the people who have so persistently resisted God.