

## The New People of God



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On one occasion Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (*Matthew 16:15*) "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah (Christ), the Son of the living God.'" (*16:16*)

📖 "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church<sup>1</sup>...' (*Matthew 16:17-18a, NIV*)

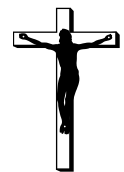
Those who identify with Jesus Christ through faith become part of his Church – the community of believers (body of Christ, Christians). Peter later wrote to Christians (including Gentiles<sup>2</sup>)...

📖 "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (*1 Peter 2:9-10, NIV*)

1. How does Peter's description of the Christian Church compare to the Old Testament description of Israel?<sup>3</sup> (*Exodus 19:5-6*)

### How do the "New People" Relate to Israel?

2. Read Ephesians 2:11-22. Paul says Gentiles were formerly "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." What did God do to change that situation? What was necessary?<sup>4</sup>



3. What is the result of the change? How do Gentile believers benefit?

- Gentile believers are "\_\_\_\_\_ with God's people" (*Ephesians 2:19*).
- Gentile believers are "also members of [God's] \_\_\_\_\_, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (*2:19-20*).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'church' (*ekklesia*) – assembly of people, congregation. In the New Testament, the 'church' refers to the body of believers in Jesus Christ, which I am calling 'the new people of God.' Christians are 'the new people of God.' I am not saying the Church replaces Israel as the people of God, or become a separate people of God distinct from ethnic Israel. Rather the 'newness' of the Church is based in its union with Christ and his inauguration of the new covenant.

<sup>2</sup> 'Gentile' – a person who is not a Jew or Israelite.

<sup>3</sup> Peter's description reflects Exodus 19:5-6 which is addressed to Israel. The Septuagint translates verse 6, "you (Israel) shall be to me (God) a royal priesthood and a holy nation." Peter calls Christians what Israel was called in the Old Testament (OT). The church does not *replace* Israel, but the church is a fulfillment of the OT promises made to Israel.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ died as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, to provide the way for *both* Jews and Gentiles to be reconciled to God (restored to relationship with God). By making peace between them and God, he made peace between Israel and Gentiles. The dividing wall was destroyed.

<sup>5</sup> Gentile believers are 'no longer foreigners and strangers' but members of God's household. They are 'heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.' (*3:6; cf. Galatians 3:29*)

- Gentile believers & Jewish believers "are being built together into a \_\_\_\_\_ in which God lives by his Spirit" (2:21-22).<sup>6</sup>

If the "new people" are now God's People, what is the status of Israel today and in the future? We will return to this question. But first, what is the purpose of God's people?

## The Purpose of God's People

In the Old Testament, Israel was called "[God's] treasured possession" and a "holy nation" (*Exodus 19:5-6*). As a 'kingdom of priests' (*19:6*), they were to represent God, mediate His grace to others, and be a channel of blessing to the nations. In general, they were to know God and make Him known, so He may be glorified in all the earth.

4. What is the purpose of God's people today? How should this affect the Christian's life goals and daily activities?

Consider the following verses.<sup>7</sup>

- ⚙ 1 Peter 2:9 (see page 1)
- ⚙ Acts 1:8
- ⚙ Colossians 3:12-17
- ⚙ Matthew 5:13-16
- ⚙ Matthew 22:37-39



## If the "New People" are Now God's People, What is the Status of Israel?

Paul talks about this in his letter to the Romans (chap. 9-11).<sup>8</sup> Some of his main points follow:

- "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel"<sup>9</sup> (*Romans 9:6*)
- "it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (*Romans 9:8*)

In other words, there is a true Israel within ethnic Israel. "True Israel" is saved by God's grace through faith. The way of salvation is Jesus Christ, but most of ethnic Israel has rejected Christ.

<sup>6</sup> The Holy Spirit is part of the promise (*Galatians 3:14*).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, many other Bible verses could be listed. Perhaps you have other verses to share!

<sup>8</sup> After Paul writes about the Gentiles' inclusion and Israel's stubbornness, he asks the question, 'Did God reject his people (Israel)?' (*Romans 11:1*). He answers, 'By no means! ...God did not reject his people...' (*11:1, 2*)

<sup>9</sup> Paul distinguishes between the mere physical descendants of Abraham and his spiritual descendants. Those who have faith in Christ are spiritual descendants of Abraham (*Romans 4:13-24; Galatians 3:29*). Those Jews who are spiritual descendants of Abraham are the *true* Israel (which is a minority of Jews). People do not automatically receive God's salvation because of natural relationship.

☐ Paul uses the metaphor of the olive tree. See Romans 11:11-24.<sup>10</sup>

- ♣ The tree represents the true people of God.
- ♣ The "root" (11:16) represents the patriarchs (fathers of Israel) and the promises given to them.
- ♣ The natural branches that remain on the olive tree represent believing Israel (true Israel, or the believing "remnant").
- ♣ The natural, but broken-off branches represent unbelieving Israel.
- ♣ The grafted-in wild olive shoots represent Gentile believers.
- ♣ The salvation of the Gentiles will make Israel envious (*Romans 11:11*).
- ♣ The natural, broken-off branches *can* be grafted back into the olive tree, *if* they believe in Jesus Christ (*Romans 11:23*).



"In this way (that is, after being made envious by the Gentiles' salvation and inclusion in the true people of God) all Israel<sup>11</sup> will be saved" (*Romans 11:26*). "All Israel" does not mean every Israelite, but a large and representative portion of the Israelites (i.e., Israel as a whole) will finally receive their Messiah at a particular time in the future.<sup>12</sup>

## Reflection & Application

- Are you one of "God's people?" Are you a citizen of heaven? (*Philippians 3:20*) This citizenship is received through faith in Jesus Christ. Everyone is invited. Do you need to trust in Jesus Christ, and commit your loyalty to him?<sup>13</sup>
- If you are a true Christian, you are one of God's people. You are a citizen of heaven. As a citizen, you have tremendous privileges! You also have responsibilities. Reflect on question 4 above, and the Scripture passages listed. Ask yourself these questions:
  - What am I doing to fulfill God's purpose for His people?
  - To be a better representative of God's people, what changes are needed in my life?

## Remaining Questions

- ? Questions remain from Lesson 13. It seems that God's promises still need further fulfillment. It seems that some prophecies have not been fulfilled. What about Israel's restoration to "the promised land?" Where is the kingdom of righteousness, peace and harmony, under the visible reign of the Messiah, the King of kings? Where is the perfect relationship with God? We will consider these questions in Lesson 15.

<sup>10</sup> Paul uses this metaphor to respond to a problem. Apparently, the Gentile Christians in Rome thought too highly of themselves relative to Israel (11:18, 20, 25). Maybe they thought God had totally rejected Israel and *replaced* them with a new people *centered* in the Gentile Christian church. Paul talks directly to the Gentiles about this subject.

<sup>11</sup> 'all Israel' (*pas Israēl*) has been interpreted as 1) the true people of God, including Jews and Gentiles (*Galatians 6:16*); 2) the small, believing remnant within Israel; and 3) ethnic Israel as a whole. Most commentators favor (3) because it best fits the context of Romans 11, including the flow of Paul's argument. It is unlikely that the meaning of 'Israel' would change between verses 25 and 26.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that there are various interpretations of Romans 9-11. According to the interpretation given here, ethnic Israel still has a part in God's program. This interpretation is widely held, though there is disagreement concerning the significance of ethnic Israel in the future. Some other interpretations do not recognize ethnic Israel as having a part in God's future program. See the ICF website (Articles and Studies, 'Romans: Good News for the World') for a more detailed study of Romans 9-11.

<sup>13</sup> 'Citizenship in heaven' is just one description of the Christian's status. A person who trusts in Christ also becomes a 'child of God' (*John 1:12*) and heirs of God the Father (*Romans 8:17*).

## Different Views of “the People of God”

Christians have different views about “the people of God,” particularly concerning the Church’s relationship with Israel. The two predominant “theological systems” addressing this subject are “dispensational theology” and “covenant theology.”<sup>14</sup>

- Dispensational theology maintains a distinction between Israel and the Church, at least until the Old Testament covenants, promises, and prophecies are “literally” fulfilled. In particular, dispensationalists believe ethnic Israel will be physically restored to the promised land under the rule of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) when he returns to establish his millennial kingdom.
- Covenant theology views the Church as the true Israel (spiritual Israel), based on its union with Jesus Christ, who is *the* true Israel.<sup>15</sup> As Abraham’s spiritual children, Christians are full heirs to God’s promises to Abraham. The earthly “promised land” is a type or pattern of something greater – a heavenly land, which all of Abraham’s spiritual children inherit.

The teacher of this course (Jay) does not identify with either dispensational or covenant theology.<sup>16</sup> Anyway, he believes there is one “true” people of God (“in Christ,” including both Jews & Gentiles) and also a future for ethnic Israel in God’s program. Jay thinks the olive tree metaphor (page 3) is very helpful in understanding this subject.

## To the Jew First

The New Testament narrative indicates the priority of Israel. As a Jew and the Son of David, Jesus “came in fulfillment of his people’s history as their King and Redeemer... He himself was sent as their Messiah. The messianic people of God developed out of the Jewish remnant and expanded to include Gentiles [non-Jews].”<sup>17</sup>

📖 *When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples, he said, “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel...” (Matthew 10:5-6, NIV)*

“This restriction to Israel should not be read as a permanent pattern for the disciples. They restricted themselves to Israel for a limited period of salvation history, during the time in which Jesus conducted his earthly ministry, just as Jesus mainly confined himself to Israel during his ministry, for the promises were first given to the Jews.”<sup>18</sup>

The New Testament narrative also clearly indicates the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation.<sup>19</sup> In his ‘great commission,’ Jesus told his disciples, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (*Matthew 28:19*).<sup>20</sup>



<sup>14</sup> There are variations of dispensational and covenant theology, and there are also other theological systems. The differences between these systems are complex. While further study is recommended, especially for Christians, the important thing is to understand that different views exist because you will likely hear differences in Bible teaching.

<sup>15</sup> According to covenant theology, the Church did not ‘replace’ Israel but rather, *in Christ*, fulfilled Israel.

<sup>16</sup> Jay doesn’t like to be labeled. If you have questions about what he thinks, ask him.

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Matthew Chapters 1 through 12* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 244. The apostle Paul understood the priority of Israel, represented by his statement that the gospel was ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (*Romans 1:16*).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 450.

<sup>19</sup> This is evident from the very beginning of the Gospels, where three Gentiles (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth) are included in Jesus’ genealogy (*Matthew 1:3, 5*) and Gentiles from the east come to worship the one born king of the Jews (*2:1-12*).

<sup>20</sup> The book of Acts records proclamation of the gospel beyond Israel toward ‘the ends of the earth’ (*Acts 1:8*). The epistles (letters) reveal the establishment, discipling, and growth of the Church (God’s people) outside Israel.