



18 LESSON CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

Lesson 5

THE JEWS IN THE PURPOSE OF GOD

No one can deny that the Jews are among the most remarkable people the world has ever known. They have always been marked out as being different. Constantly through their history they have suffered because of difference of race and religion. They have often been hated or despised, despite the effort made by many Jews to become more closely united with the nations among which they lived.

Jews are a separate people, not because they want to be, but because they have been chosen by God to be His special people.

God's relationship with the Jews began with one man, Abram, who lived in the idolatrous city of Ur, in the land which is now Iraq. God called him to leave Ur and come to the land now called Israel. Abram, believing and obeying God, became the pattern and father of all who are God's children by faith. Later on his name was changed to Abraham.

The Jews are descended from Abraham through his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, who was later given the name Israel. A great famine drove Jacob and his large family down to Egypt, where they prospered and became very numerous, enjoying the favour of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. But after a while another king came to power, who began to fear and mistrust the Israelites and made them slaves. Their toil and suffering grew to be so great that they cried to God for help. God sent Moses as their deliverer, demanding that they should be allowed to leave Egypt.

Pharaoh was determined to keep them, but God, working through Moses, brought a series of disastrous plagues upon the land. The will of Pharaoh was broken and the Israelites were allowed to go.

The covenant with Israel

After they departed, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued after them. But by another great miracle the Israelites escaped across the Red Sea and came to Mount Sinai in Arabia, where God made a solemn agreement with them, and gave them a set of laws. These are the words of God to them:

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:5,6)

Thus the Israelites were called to obey God, just as Abraham had done before them. As long as they were obedient, they would prosper as God's people, a holy nation. However, this great privilege brought with it heavy responsibilities. The consequences, both of obedience and of disobedience, were clearly laid before them. Obedience would bring many blessings, with peace and plenty in the land of Canaan, now Israel, which they would have for an everlasting possession.

On the other hand, if they disobeyed and began to worship the gods of the nations around them, disaster would overtake them:

"The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies . . . you will be left few in number, because you did not obey the Lord your God . . . The Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other . . . Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. . . You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both day and night, never sure of your life." (Deuteronomy 28:25,62,64-66).

These words, intended as a warning, became a prophecy of the history of the nation. While they lived in the land of Israel, they constantly disobeyed, and in the end they rejected the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and were responsible for his death. All the warnings of punishment came to pass. During the last two thousand years they have suffered repeated persecutions, mainly at the hands of Christian nations. The Holocaust in Europe in the last century was a terrible experience for Jews.

But they have survived, as God intended they should. They are witnesses to the reality of God's existence. There are Jews today in almost every country of the world, though until the end of the 19th Century very few were to be found in Israel.

Israel's king

But that situation changed, as the prophets of the Old Testament had long ago foretold. God has not forgotten His people, and the prophet Ezekiel speaks about their promised return to the land of the fathers:

"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land . . . You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:24,28).

In Lesson 4 we referred to Ezekiel 37:22, and the promise that, after returning to the land, Israel will have a king, who is Jesus Christ. So the return of the Jews to their land is bound up with the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth. He said himself that Jerusalem is 'the city of the Great King' (Matthew 5:35), who will reign from Jerusalem over the whole world.

An important question remains to be asked: at present the Jews still cannot accept the idea that God could have a Son, and so reject Jesus as their Messiah. Many of them are indeed awaiting the coming of Messiah, but they believe that though he will be a great man, he will be mortal, and will eventually die after he has completed his work of restoring Israel to greatness.

Israel's future

Will this situation change? Will the Jews continue to reject Jesus as the Son of God? It appears from prophecy that before the return of Christ the Jews will go through a disastrous period, when all they have achieved will be lost. Jerusalem will again be attacked and captured by hostile armies, but God will deliver them. These armies will finally be defeated and Jerusalem will be saved.

"It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it." (Jeremiah 30:7).

"I will gather all nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked... then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations . . . On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem . . ." (Zechariah 14:2-4).

The Mount of Olives was the place from where Jesus went into heaven, and the disciples were promised that he would return the same way as he went (Acts 1:11).

So far as the Jews in the land are concerned, this will be the cause of their conversion. They will learn that the one who has saved them from their enemies is none other than Jesus Christ.

"They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child " (Zechariah 12:10).

When Jesus and the apostles first went about preaching, they 'preached the Kingdom of God'. In our next lesson we shall learn about the connection between the history of the Jewish people and the coming Kingdom of God.

Summary

The Jews are the descendants of Abraham, and were chosen by God to be His special people. Because of constant disobedience they were punished, and finally scattered throughout the world. Their return to their ancient land is a sign that the return of Christ is near. At his return they will be delivered out of a time of great trouble, and will be converted.

Questions

E1 In the Old Testament here are several prophecies concerning the Jews which have already been fulfilled. Can you mention two of them?

E2 Apart from a few, Jews generally do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Will they do so in the future, and if so, what will cause such a change?

Are you able to agree with what you have read here?