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THE GLORIOUS AND INCOMPARABLE PROMISES OF THE BIBLE

by Thomas Ice

During the first half of World War II General Douglas MacArthur was forced to leave the Philippines in the Pacific Theater by the Japanese. Upon his departure he made a promise to the Philippino people: "I will return." General MacArthur, through the strength and power of the American military was able to keep his promise. If humanity can make and keep promises of rescue and deliverance, how much more will our great God keep the glorious and incomparable promises He has made in His Word! Indeed, He has told us that He will one day return and fulfill the great and many promises about the glorious future in store for those who know Him as their Savior.

Why are promises important to God? Promises are important to God's plan for history, because God keeps His word. History is a record of God's faithfulness to keep His promises. Thus, God delights in making seemingly impossible promises so that He, through the most difficult circumstances, demonstrates that He keeps His promises. Think of God's record of faithfulness next time you are tempted by circumstances to go back on your word. There are three great promises that God has made to His people that I want to examine in this chapter. These promises are Israel's permanence, Christ's second coming, and eternal life to all believers.

PROMISE OF ISRAEL'S PERMANENCE

Scripture makes it clear that God's integrity in history revolves around His chosen people Israel. It is through Israel that God has chosen to leave His mark through out history. It is through Israel that God gave His Law, founded a nation, caused His presence to dwell, mediated His Word, and sent the Savior of the world. It will be through Israel in the future that God will work to preach the gospel through out the whole world, invoke the second coming, reign for a thousand years in Jerusalem, and place His eternal glory. Thus, God's promise to Israel is that they have an eternal permanence in history and throughout eternity. The Lord says through Jeremiah

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; the LORD of hosts is His name: LORD If this fixed order departs from before Me," declares the LORD, "then the offspring of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me forever." (Jeremiah 31:35–36)

Most American evangelical Christians today have a high view of Jews and the modern state of Israel because of the positive influence of the dispensational premillennial view that national Israel has a future in the plan of God. Yet, there are those within Christendom who deny that Israel has a permanent place in the plan of God. This view is known as replacement theology.

What is replacement theology? Replacement theology is the view that the Church has permanently replaced Israel as the instrument through which God works and that national Israel does not have a future in the plan of God. Some replacement theologians may believe that individual Jews will be converted and enter into the church (something that we all believe), but they do not believe that God will literally fulfill the dozens of Old Testament promises to a converted national Israel in the future. For example, reconstructionist David Chilton says that "ethnic Israel was excommunicated for its apostasy and will never again be God's Kingdom."¹ Chilton says again, "the Bible does not tell of any future plan for Israel as a *special* nation."² Reconstructionist patriarch, R. J. Rushdoony uses the strongest

¹David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler, TX: Reconstruction Press, 1985), p. 224.

²Ibid.

language when he declares,

The fall of Jerusalem, and the public rejection of physical Israel as the chosen people of God, meant also the deliverance of the true people of God, the church of Christ, the elect, out of the bondage to Israel and Jerusalem, . . .³
A further heresy clouds premillennial interpretations of Scripture—their exaltation of racism into a divine principle. Every attempt to bring the Jew back into prophecy as a Jew is to give *race* and *works* (for racial descent is a human work) a priority over *grace* and *Christ's work* and is nothing more or less than paganism. . . . There can be no compromise with this vicious heresy.⁴

The Road to Holocaust

Replacement theology and its view that Israel is finished in history nationally has been responsible for producing theological anti-Semitism in the church. History records that such a theology, when combined with the right social and political climate, has produced and allowed anti-Semitism to flourish. This was a point made by Hal Lindsey in *The Road to Holocaust*, to which reconstructionists cried foul. A book was written to rebut Lindsey by Jewish reconstructionist Steve Schlissel. Strangely, Schlissel's book (*Hal Lindsey & The Restoration of the Jews*) ended up supporting Lindsey's thesis that replacement theology produced anti-Semitism in the past and could in the future. Schlissel seems to share Lindsey's basic view on the rise and development of anti-Semitism within the history of the church. After giving his readers an overview of the history of anti-Semitism through Origen, Augustine, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Jerome, Schlissel then quotes approvingly Raul Hilberg's famous quote featured in Lindsey's *Holocaust*.

Viewing the plight of the Jews in Christian lands from the fourth century to the recent holocaust, one Jew observed, "First we were told 'You're not good enough to live among us as Jews.' Then we were told, 'You're not good enough to live among us.' Finally we were told, 'You're not good enough to live.'"⁵

Schlissel then comments approvingly upon Hilberg's statement,

This devastatingly accurate historical analysis was the fruit of an error, a building of prejudice and hate erected upon a false theological foundation. The blindness of the church regarding the place of the Jew in redemptive history is, I believe, directly responsible for the wicked sins and attitudes described above. What the church believes about the Jews has always made a difference. But the church has not *always* believed a lie.⁶

The truth, noted by Schlissel, is what his other reconstructionist brethren deny. What Schlissel has called a lie is the replacement theology that his reconstructionist brethren advocate. Their form of replacement theology is the problem. Schlissel goes on to show that the Reformed church of Europe, after the Reformation, widely adopted the belief that

³Rousas John Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come: Studies in Daniel and Revelation* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1970), p. 82.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵Steve Schlissel & David Brown, *Hal Lindsey & The Restoration of the Jews* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1990), p. 47. For a survey of the history of anti-Semitism in the Church see David Rausch, *Building Bridges: Understanding Jews and Judaism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), pp. 87-171.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

God's future plan for Israel includes a national restoration of Israel. Many even taught that Israel would one day rebuild her Temple. For his Reformed brethren to arrive at such conclusions meant that they were interpreting the Old Testament promises to Israel literally, at least some of them. This shift from replacement theology to a national future for Israel resulted in a decline in persecution of the Jews in many Reformed communities and increased efforts in Jewish evangelism. Schlissel notes:

the change in the fortune of the Jews in Western civilization can be traced, not to humanism, but to the Reformed faith. The rediscovery of Scripture brought a rekindling of the Biblical conviction that God had not, in fact, fully nor finally rejected His people.⁷

Yet Schlissel is concerned that his Reformed brethren are abandoning this future national hope for Israel as they currently reassert a strong view of replacement theology.

Whatever views were maintained as to Israel's political restoration, their spiritual future was simply a given in Reformed circles. Ironically, this sure and certain hope is not a truth kept burning brightly in many Christian Reformed Churches today, . . . In fact, their future conversion aside, the Jews' very existence is rarely referred to today, and even then it is not with much grace or balance.⁸

This extract establishes that the "spiritualized" notion of "Israel" in Rom 11:25, 26, was known to and *rejected by* the body of Dutch expositors. . . .

Since the turn of the century, most modern Dutch Reformed, following Kuyper and Bavinck, reject this historic position.⁹

Reconstructionist Schlissel seems to think that part of the reason why many of his Reformed brethren are returning to replacement theology is due to their reaction to the strong emphasis of a future for Israel as a nation found within dispensational premillennialism. Yet, dispensational premillennialism developed within the Reformed tradition as many began to consistently take all the Old Testament promises that were yet fulfilled for Israel as still valid for a future Jewish nation. Schlissel complains:

just a century ago *all* classes of Reformed interpreters held to the certainty of the future conversion of Israel *as a nation*. How they have come, to a frightening extent, to depart from their historic positions regarding the certainty of Israel's future conversion is not our subject here. . . . the hope of the future conversion of the Jews became closely linked, at the turn of the century and beyond, with Premillennial Dispensationalism, an eschatological heresy. This, necessarily, one might say, soon became bound up and confused with Zionism. Christians waxed loud about the return of the Jews to Israel being a portent that the Second Coming is nigh. It thus seemed impossible, for many, to distinguish between the spiritual hope of Israel and their political "hope." Many Reformed, therefore, abandoned both.¹⁰

Historical Development

As it should be, the nature of Israel's future became the watershed issue in biblical interpretation which caused a polarization of positions that we find today. As Schlissel noted, "all classes of Reformed interpreters held to the certainty of the future conversion of

⁷Ibid., p. 59.

⁸Ibid., p. 42.

⁹Ibid., pp. 49-50.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 39-40.

Israel as a nation.” Today most Reformed interpreters do not hold such a view. Why? Early in the systemization of any theological position the issues are undeveloped and less clear than later when the consistency of various positions are worked out. Thus it is natural for the mature understanding of any theological issue to lead to polarization of viewpoints as a result of interaction and debate between positions. The earlier Reformed position to which Schlissel refers included a blend of some Old Testament passages that were taken literally (i.e., those teaching a future conversion of Israel as a nation) and some that were not (i.e., details of Israel’s place of dominance during a future period of history). On the one hand, as time passed, those who stressed a literal understanding of Israel from the Old Testament became much more consistent in applying such an approach to all passages relating to Israel’s destiny. On the other hand, those who thought literalism was taken too far retreated from whatever degree of literalness they did have and argued that the church fulfills Israel’s promises, thus there was no need for a national Israel in the future. Further, non-literal interpretation was viewed as the tool with which liberals denied the essentials of the faith. Thus, by World War II dispensationalism had come to virtually dominate evangelicals who saw literal interpretation of the Bible as a primary support for orthodoxy.

After World War II many of the battles between fundamentalism and liberalism began to wane. Such an environment allowed for less stigma attached to non literal interpretation within conservative circles. Thus, by the ’70s, not having learned the lessons of history, we began to see the revival of many prophetic views that were returning to blends of literal and spiritual interpretation. As conservative postmillennialism has risen from near extinction in recent years, it did not return to the mixed hermeneutics of 100 years ago, which Schlissel longs for, but instead, it has been wedded with preterism in hopes that it can combat the logic of dispensational futurism. Schlissel’s Reformed brethren do not appear to be concerned that, in preterism, they have revived a brand of eschatology which includes one of the most hard-core forms of replacement theology. And they do not appear convinced or concerned that replacement theology has a history of producing theological anti-Semitism when mixed with the right social and political conditions.

The Modern State of Israel

The fact that the last fifty years has seen a world-wide regathering and reestablishment of the nation of Israel, which is now poised in just the setting required for the revealing of the Antichrist and the start of the tribulation, is God’s grand indicator that all of the other areas of world development are prophetically significant. Dr. Walvoord says,

Of the many peculiar phenomena which characterize the present generation, few events can claim equal significance as far as Biblical prophecy is concerned with that of the return of Israel to their land. It constitutes a preparation for the end of the age, the setting for the coming of the Lord for His church, and the fulfillment of Israel’s prophetic destiny.¹¹

Israel, God’s “super-sign” of the end times is a clear indicator that time is growing shorter with each passing hour. God is preparing the world for the final events leading up to Israel’s national regeneration.

What one believes about the future of Israel is of utmost importance to one’s understanding of the Bible. I believe, without a shadow of doubt, that Old Testament promises made to national Israel will literally be fulfilled in the future. This means the Bible teaches that God will return the Jews to their land before the tribulation begins (Isaiah 11:11–12:6; Ezekiel 20:33-44; 22:17-22; Zephaniah 2:1-3). This has been accomplished and the stage is set as a result of the current existence of the modern state of Israel. The Bible also indicates that before Israel enters into her time of national blessing she must first

¹¹John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1964), p. 26

pass through the fire of the tribulation (Deuteronomy 4:30; Jeremiah. 30:5-9; Daniel 12:1; Zephaniah 1:14-18). Even though the horrors of the Holocaust under Hitler were of an unimaginable magnitude, the Bible teaches that a time of even greater trial awaits Israel during the tribulation. Anti-Semitism will reach new heights, this time global in scope, in which two-thirds of world Jewry will be killed (Zechariah 13:7-9; Revelation 12). Through this time God will protect His remnant so that before His second advent "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:36). In fact, the second coming will include the purpose of God's physical rescue of Israel from world persecution during Armageddon (Daniel 12:1; Zechariah 12-14; Matthew 24:29-31; Revelation 19:11-21).

If national Israel is a historical "has been," then all of this is obviously wrong. However, the Bible says she has a future and world events will revolve around that tiny nation at the center of the earth. The world's focus already is upon Israel. God has preserved His people for a reason and it is not all bad. In spite of the fact that history is progressing along the lines of God's ordained pattern for Israel, we see the revival of replacement theology within conservative circles that will no doubt be used in the future to fuel the fires of anti-Semitism, as it has in the past. Your view of the future of national Israel is not just an academic exercise.

PROMISE OF CHRIST'S SECOND COMING

Even though we now live in a secular society, a recent poll by *U. S. News & World Report* found that a majority of Americans still believe that Jesus Christ will return:

Belief in apocalyptic prophecies is not just a phenomenon of the religious fringe. According to a recent *U. S. News* poll, 66 percent of Americans, including a third of those who say they never go attend church, say they believe that Jesus Christ will return to Earth someday—an increase from the 61 percent who expressed belief in the Second Coming three years ago.¹²

Though many may not realize its significance, the return of Jesus Christ to planet Earth is the most important event that will occur in the future. But what do we know about the coming of Christ? Is it only a heart-felt hope and historical hype, or do we have a clear and certain word from God on this event?

The prophetic promise of the second coming of Jesus Christ to earth is the subject of many passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. What are some of the more prominent texts? They include some of the following: Deuteronomy 30:3; Psalm 2; Isaiah 63:1-6; Daniel 2:44-45; 7:13-14; Zechariah 14:1-4; Matthew 24-25; Mark 13; Luke 21; Acts 1:9-11; Romans 11:26; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-2:12; 2 Peter 2:1-3:17; Jude 14-15; Revelation 1:7; 19:11-21.

Probably the most graphic portrayal of Christ's second coming is found in Revelation 19:11-21. In this extended passage Jesus Christ is described as leading a procession of angels and saints or armies in heaven to claim the earth, destroy the armies of the world, and defeat the Antichrist and False Prophet.

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce

¹²Jeffrey L. Sheler, "Dark Prophecies," *U. S. News & World Report*, December 15, 1997, p. 63.

wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God; in order that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great." And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies, assembled to make war against Him who sat upon the horse, and against His army. And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat upon the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh. (Revelation 19:11–21)

The passage above shows that Christ's return will be one that entails great physical destruction and many deaths. For those who are not Christ's own, it will be a terrifying and terrible event. For those of us who know Him as their Savior, it will be a time of great joy, vindication, and anticipation.

The Bible depicts the career of Christ as revolving around two major aspects. Titus 2:11–14 speaks of Christ's two appearances on earth.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus; who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:11–14)

The first phase is related to His coming in humiliation to die for the sins of mankind. The second phase is when He will come in power and glory to reign over all mankind. Hebrews 9:28 is a single verse that explains and contrasts Christ's two comings. The writer of Hebrews says "so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him." Jesus is coming again. This is a glorious promise and hope for all believers.

The future is not all gloom and doom. It holds trials of an unprecedented nature in human history, but it also contains the glorious return of Jesus Christ to establish his righteous reign in preparation for the eternal state. The history of the Old Testament era was one of expectation for the first coming of the Messiah. The history of the New Testament and our own era is one of expectation for the second coming of Messiah. Such an expectation is voiced when we pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." His kingdom will come when Christ returns and all of creation will acknowledge Jesus Christ, the hope of history. Let's see what the Bible says about that coming!

PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE

Eternal life is the gift of God given to all who believe in Jesus Christ and have accepted His offer of salvation based upon His death and resurrection (John 10:10; Ephesians 2:8-9). In the Bible, eternal life emphasizes a quality of life, a quality that can only be imparted by God Himself. This life does not, of course, make us God, we are and will always remain creatures, however, it is a quality of life that comes from the God who has the quality of eternity. Therefore, eternal life should not be confused with endless or eternal existence which everyone will experience. Eternal existence will be common to the redeemed and the unredeemed, but the destinies will be very different. Christians will enter into heaven

and the presence of God; unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11–15).

For those of us who have trusted Jesus Christ as our Savior, we are given the promise of eternal life the moment we believe. John says, “the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:11–13). If you have trusted in Christ, then you have eternal life in the present which will continue throughout eternity in heaven for the believer. Believers have the hope of eternal life in heaven with our Lord for eternity.

Heaven is very real. In an age of fantasy, special effects, mysticism, and spiritual apathy it's easy for heaven to be misrepresented. Yet, the Bible is very clear about the existence and purpose of heaven. Heaven and the eternal state are part of God's plan for the ages and therefore, heaven and eternal life are integrally related. There would not be much point in experiencing eternity if the quality of life were not worth looking forward to. This will be the case for those who will dwell for eternity in the Lake of Fire. But since we will spend eternity living out our eternal life in heaven, free from sin, and in the presence of our Lord, then heaven and the presence of God is what makes eternal life worth while.

The Bible describes eternal life in heaven as full of joy, purposeful activity, and worship. When we think of eternity, it's easy to wonder if we will get bored in heaven and discontented. However, the biblical glimpses are not ones of boredom and disinterest. The Bible speaks of at least six activities in heaven: worship, service, authority, fellowship, learning, and rest. Therefore, eternal life lived in heaven will consist of worship without distraction, service without exhaustion, authority without failure, fellowship without suspicion, learning without suspicion, and resting without boredom. What glorious things our Lord has promised to His people!

CONCLUSION

Anyone familiar with God's word knows that He has a wonderful plan for history and His people. These are indeed glorious and incomparable promises through which He implements His plan. What should the response of the believer be to God's promises? The Psalmist rightly advises, “What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits toward me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD” (Psalm 116:12–13). In the New Testament, our Lord was quizzed by the multitude in Capernaum when they said as follows: “They said therefore to Him, ‘What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘this is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent’” (John 6:28–29). Is this not what our Lord has wanted since the Garden of Eden—that we believe and trust His precious promises? Certainly He has spoken, surely it will come to pass.

When we think about the significance of the glorious promises that our Lord has in store for us as His people we respond with a thankful heart. Let us remember that for the believer this present life if the worse things will ever be for us. But, for the unbeliever, this present life will be the best they will ever experience. Let us claim the precious promises that He has made to us in the present so that He will make us fit for eternity.