

**Israel and the Church**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
April 25, 2021- PM Service  
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Genesis 12:1-4

Tonight we are going to have a teaching sermon. Tonight we are going to get a little biblical/doctrinal instruction about a specific issue. It's an issue on which Christians differ on an issue that has real life implications for the church and the world. Tonight we are going to talk about the relationship between the church and Israel. That's a big question in our modern world when it comes to religion and foreign policy. But it's also a New Testament issue that comes up in Galatians, Ephesians, Acts, Revelations and most vigorously in Romans 9-11.

It's an issue that shows up in popular media. I don't know if you have a sense of that, but let me try to give you an example. Have you heard a minister on television or maybe on the internet say something like this? "We must support Israel! The church must push our country to support Israel. We need to be on Israel's side because Israel is God's chosen. Whoever blesses Israel will be blessed, and whoever curses Israel will be cursed." It's something you hear a lot of these days. Many prominent preachers say stuff like this. People like John Hagee—he's a popular TV minister. Also Dr. David Jeremiah. I know some of you listen to him sometimes. Both those men will say things like this. Hagee will say it loudly and in a theatrical way, Jeremiah in a much more reasoned and calm way. When these men say these things, they are calling church people to support a specific foreign policy agenda, and the call is based on their theology. It's based on the way they see the relationship between Israel and the church.

Both these men are dispensationalists. Have you heard that word? You probably have. It's a stream of Christian thought that really didn't exist until the 1800's, but it has become a really strong stream within the America Evangelical church. Dispensationalism is characterized by a whole set of doctrines, some of which we agree with and some of which we don't. I can't talk about all those doctrines tonight, but I do want to talk about how the dispensationalists see the relationship between Israel and the church. Because it's different than what our church has believed and it's different from what other Reformed and Lutherans and the Catholics and the Orthodox churches believe. It's different from what the church has believed throughout its history. I'm not doing this because I want this to be bash the dispensationalist Sunday; I'm doing this because it's an important issue, it has real life implications, and the many media sources that put out the dispensational message end up confusing people.

The dispensationalists believe that God has made 2 covenants, one with the church—people like us, and one with Israel. They are two separate covenants with separate plans, separate stipulations and practices. The covenant with the Jews is the Old Testament covenant, the one with the temple and the feasts and the kosher laws and all the other rules. The covenant with the church is the new covenant, the one with baptism and the Lord's Supper and the church structure and the promises of grace. The Old Testament covenant with Israel isn't fulfilled by the New Covenant, it continues on a separate track. In the dispensationalist's way of reading the Bible, the two covenant stories have a very different ending. The church story, the age of the church will end with the rapture. The faithful church people will be lifted out of history, and will be with God in the heavenly places forever. That's the church covenant story. For the dispensationalists, the Jewish salvation path really kicks in after the rapture. After the rapture, there will be 7 years of tribulation- a world conflict and mayhem. After the 7 years of tribulation, the millennium starts. Jesus will return and reign in Jerusalem for a thousand years. At that point the Jews will

acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah. They will return to him. The temple will be rebuilt and all the Old Testament practices will be fully established. With Jesus physically present as their king, the people of Israel will rule over the nations of the world. After the 1000 years are up, you have the battle of Armageddon when the devil is finally defeated, and when Jews and Christians are finally united in heaven.

Now, in that end time story there are all sorts of beliefs that are different from what we believe. We don't believe in the rapture, and we have a different interpretation of the millennium, the 1000 years talked about in Revelation 20. I'm not going to talk about those differences today. I have some other sermons on those things and I can send them to you if you want. Today I want to talk about this notion that Israel and the church have two different covenants, the notion that there are two different tracks of salvation for church people and Jewish people.

Where does this notion come from? It starts with a basic assumption that dispensationalists make when they read Old Testament prophecy. They believe that every time the Old Testament makes a promise to Israel, the promise is made to Israel the ethnic people, to Israel the political entity, to Israel the nation state. Every time God makes a promise to Israel in the Old Testament that's a promise to Israel the nation-state, and we should expect God to fulfill that promise to the country of Israel. So, for example, tonight we read a foundational promise for Israel. In this text, God promises Abraham that he will make him into a great nation. His descendants will bless the whole earth. "Whoever blesses them I will bless, and whoever curses them, I will curse." In the Old Testament, the descendants of Abraham are the nation of Israel. And the prophecy about blessings and curses is born out in their history. When Joseph helped lead Egypt, Egypt was blessed. When Egypt turned against Israel, Egypt was cursed by the plagues. When Nebuchadnezzar listened to Daniel, Babylon was blessed. When Nebuchadnezzar went against Daniel, things didn't go so well. So far so good. Modern dispensationalists extend those promises up to the present day. Those promises still apply to modern day Israel, and they stand as a warning to countries like the United States about the policies they should take toward modern day Israel. The church and the nations of the world should always take Israel's side, because if they don't they will be cursed. It's right there in Genesis 12!! I read a bunch of dispensationalists this week and watched a few videos. One of the videos was a sermon/talk that David Jeremiah gave on Genesis 12 back in 2018. Jeremiah uses this text to call on the United States to support the modern nation of Israel and he concludes his talk by saying, "God's promises and the prophecies of his word are challenging us to put Israel at the center of our prayers, our purposes and our protection." That's a good illustration of how, when a dispensationalist reads Israel in the Old Testament, he reads it as a promise for modern Israel.

How does that belief end up with two covenants and two tracks for salvation? Well, in addition to those general promises about blessings and curses, there are lots of places in the Old Testament where the prophets say things about Israel being established among the nations. Prophecies about Israel ruling over the nations, about Jerusalem becoming supreme and all the nations streaming to her. Prophecies about the temple being rebuilt and being more glorious than ever. Just a few examples here. Joel 3 talks about a day when the Lord will restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem and "I will put them on trial in the valley of Jehoshaphat for what they did to my people." Isaiah 60 says "foreigners shall rebuild your walls and their kings shall serve you." The end of Ezekiel describes the building of an enormous temple with Israel re-established in that temple and the sacrifices resuming.

If you read these as promises to the nation state of Israel, you have to admit that they have not been fulfilled in the history of Israel the nation. There is no enormous temple. Israel has never ruled over the nations. They have never presided over a trial in which all the nations of the world are judged. So, for a dispensationalist, that's got to happen at some point, and it's got to happen for the political state of Israel. So the dispensationalist theologians and interpreters have come up with this elaborate scheme, this elaborate explanation, for how all these prophecies will be fulfilled. Most dispensationalist theologians say these prophecies will be fulfilled in the millennial period, that 1000 years when Jesus will reign as king in Jerusalem, and the temple will be rebuilt and the nation of Israel will be the ruling nation. That's where the two-track covenant comes from. If you read all the Old Testament references to Israel to apply to the nation state of Israel, you have to come up with a two track scheme like this to make the promises fit.

This vision of Israel's political future has a significant influence on the kinds of policies towards Israel that dispensational leaders want today. When the United States moved the embassy in Jerusalem to Jerusalem a couple of years ago, many of these leaders cheered because they saw it as a further fulfillment of prophecy. Everything is being prepared for Jesus' 1000-year reign. The end times are getting closer and we're helping them along.

Now with respect, I want to disagree with my dispensationalist brothers and sisters. We agree with people like David Jeremiah on many things, but we disagree with him about this, and this stuff matters. It has real life implications. So I want you to listen with discernment when you hear preachers on the internet talking about Israel and prophecy.

Here is the difference between how we read Genesis 12 and how the dispensationalists read it. When we hear God promise to Abraham that his descendants will be a great nation, ultimately it's not a promise to the nation state of Israel, it's a promise for the whole people of God. God promises Abraham that he will be the Father of the whole people of God. The people of God will come from Abraham. All the nations will be blessed through the people of God. It's not just Israel, that's us too.

This is tricky, because during the Old Testament period, the nation of Israel, the political entity, was the people of God. You could almost talk about the two interchangeably. Almost. There were always indications that the people God was founding in Abraham was meant to expand beyond this one nation. God deliberately brings these outsiders like Rahab and Ruth to be part of his story. We have stories like the story of Jonah, which shows how God's love doesn't stop at Israel's borders but goes all the way to Nineveh. In Genesis 12 we don't just see God starting the nation of Israel, we see him starting his people. We see him establishing his covenant, a covenant that will lead to the worldwide people of God. It's one family, one holy nation, one royal priesthood. In Genesis 12 God plants his covenant tree. That tree starts with the shoot and the trunk of Israel and the Jewish people, but through Jesus' death and resurrection, through the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the tree expands, the branches multiply. Now it's not just Jews, now there are people from every nation tribe and language in the covenant tree. Now there are Samaritans, Parthians and Medes, Americans and Canadians, and yes Palestinians too. We are children of Abraham. We are all part of the one covenant tree.

Here's the crucial interpretive point: when you read an Old Testament prophet prophesy something about Israel, don't think of political Israel, think of the family of God. When you hear a prophecy in the Old Testament for Israel, you shouldn't think or hear that promise simply applying to the nation of Israel, you should hear it as a word for the entire people of God. I once had a professor say that when you read Israel in the Old Testament you should think church. That's a little too simple and flattens out some of the nuances. But it gets at the point I'm trying

to make. And that's how we've always read the Old Testament prophecies! For example: we love Isaiah 43. Isaiah 43 has this beautiful promise that we all love. "This is what the Lord says, he who formed you O Israel. I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire you will not be burned." We love that promise. We apply it to our lives and the lives of our children. We sing it in that great hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*. But in chapter 43, Isaiah addresses Israel! Are we making a mistake when apply the promise to ourselves and sing that hymn? No! Because we understand that we are part of Israel. We are in the same covenant tree. Abraham is our Father. This promise is for us. We are the Israel of God.

Ok so we believe that, but is that Biblical? Is that what the Bible teaches? Yes. Yes it does and in so many places. I want to share just a few of the places where the Bible teaches that there is only one covenant.

Turn with me to Galatians 3:26-29. Let's read that together. What is Paul saying about the relationship between Israel and the church here? So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. I think that's pretty clear. There is no Jew and Gentile—there is no division between them. They are one in Christ and heirs according to the promise. We are Abraham's seed.

Flip a few pages ahead to Galatians 6:15 and 16. See what he says there? "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean anything"—we are not separate. And then he says "peace be on all who follow this rule, the Israel of God." The Israel of God are the people who pay no attention to the distinction between Jew and Gentile but see themselves as part of the one covenant. Jews and gentiles, we are all Israel now! It's not about a political entity anymore.

Let's go to Ephesians 2. In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul makes a clear and passionate argument that the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down, and we are now united. Verse 15: "His purpose (and here he's explicitly referring to his purpose in dying on the cross) his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body reconcile both of them to God through the cross." Not two covenants, one new body, one new humanity bound by the same promise.

Finally turn to Romans 11:17. Paul is describing the relationship between the church and Israel, trying to figure out what God is doing with the Jews. He compares the promises and his covenant with Israel to a tree. 17 If some of the branches have been broken off, (many Jews don't accept Jesus and are leaving the tree of promise) and you (gentiles), though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, (you are not a separate tree; you are grafted into the promise given to Israel and nourished by those promises—it's not a separate tree) 18 do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." 20 Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. (Let's jump down to 23) 23 And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! How many covenant trees does Paul describe here? One! Paul suggests that God has a strong and special love for Jews, and he is not done with

them. Paul hints God might re-graft them back into covenant tree. But it's the same tree! There is only one tree, one covenant and one promise. There is only one covenant. When the prophets make promises to Israel, those promises aren't about the modern political state, they are made to the people of God the family of God.

I don't like writing sermons that talk about how we disagree with other Christians. I don't want to spend time fighting with family members; there are far worse enemies. But this is something that matters. This fixation with political Israel is the engine of a lot of the wild end time speculation. It's also the driver of a lot of political policy toward the state of Israel and rhetoric about why we have to support Israel no matter what. There are a lot of good reasons why we might want to support Israel. There are a lot of good reasons why we might advocate for policies that help that nation. Heaven knows the Jews have been through a lot. But biblical prophecies like Genesis 12 are not one of them.

Our Lord is working his purposes out. He will return to make all things new. We don't need to worry too much about the times for the places. And I doubt we can hurry things along. He is in charge and he knows the schedule. In the meantime, we keep our eyes on him, we praise his name, we witness to the world, and we embody his love and his kingdom in this world.

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