

The Churches of the Gentiles

Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Romans 16:3,4

The above passage is tucked very inconspicuously into a list of greetings from Paul to various members of the church at Rome. We might tend to, “skim over”, this passage of Scripture thinking there is probably not much, “meat”, there. As we discover the riches contained in these short verses we will see that their message is nothing short of revolutionary. We will also be reminded that there are no “fillers” in God’s Word. Every word on every page proceeded out of the mouth of God and is for our profit.

A Separated Nation

To fully appreciate the significance of Paul’s statement in Romans 16, we must understand God’s dealings with man prior to Paul’s ministry. In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he gives a description of the conditions that existed in “time past”.

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: Ephesians 2:11,12

In time past, God made a division in humanity between the nation Israel, the *circumcision*, and the Gentiles, the *uncircumcision*. The Old Testament Scriptures use vivid terminology to describe this division.

For they be thy people, and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest forth out of Egypt, from the midst of the furnace of iron: That thine eyes may be open unto the supplication of thy servant, and unto the supplication of thy people Israel, to hearken unto them in all that they call for unto thee. For thou didst separate them from among all the people of the earth, to be thine inheritance, as thou spakest by the hand of Moses thy servant, when thou broughtest our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord GOD. I Kings 8:51-53

And ye [Israel] shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine. Leviticus 20:26

Israel is “separate” and “severed” from other peoples of the earth. God used these strong terms to indicate the unique position He gave to His chosen nation. While these statements give clear indication of how special Israel was to God, He did more than just *say* that Israel was special. He took action to make Israel special.

One of the most significant actions God took was to give Israel the law. By giving Israel the law, God solidified the division He made in humanity. The importance of the law is found in Moses’ instructions to Israel.

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? Deuteronomy 4:5-8

The law was a visible demonstration of God’s separation and blessing of Israel. It was the righteous judgments of the law that would cause the Gentiles to look to Israel and marvel at how God blessed them. Paul affirms this in his letter to the Romans.

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. Romans 2:17-20

The law allowed Israel to know God’s will and to be the instructor of the Gentiles. It helped make them the special people that God wanted them to be.

In addition to the law, God gave Israel a land and a governmental structure to rule over them in that land. These elements of Israel’s blessing are found in His initial promise to Abraham.

Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house,

unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. Genesis 12:1-3

God promised Abraham a multiplied seed, a land in which that seed would dwell, and a governmental structure that would form the descendents of Abraham into a nation. Both the promise of a land and a government are expanded upon in future promises.

In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates: The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites. Genesis 15:18-20

And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever. According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak unto David. II Samuel 7:16,17

God gave Abraham the boundaries of the land and later, through the prophet Nathan, identified one of Abraham's descendents, David, as the beginning of the kingly line that would end with Christ. These actions of God served to make Israel a special nation.

We need to understand why God blessed Israel to make them special. Why did He separate Israel from all the other nations and give them abundant blessing? The answer is in Genesis 12 quoted above, "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." God's plan was to use His special nation to bless all nations.

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. Isaiah 2:1-3

God's ultimate goal in blessing Israel was to make them the channel through which he could bless all the nations of the world.

The Wrath to Come

In spite of God's blessings Israel was, for the most part, a disobedient and rebellious nation. Because of their disobedience, God told Israel they would be defeated and ruled by the Gentiles.

And I will make your cities waste, and bring your sanctuaries unto desolation, and I will not smell the savour of your sweet odours. And I will bring the land into desolation: and your enemies which dwell therein shall be astonished at it. And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. Leviticus 26:31-33

In the second chapter of Daniel God gives a detailed explanation of the series of Gentile nations that will rule

over Israel and all the nations of the earth. This time of Gentile world dominion is what Christ referred to as "the times of the Gentiles".

And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh. Luke 21:24-28

The times of the Gentiles will end with the return of Christ to defeat His enemies and redeem the believing remnant in Israel. It is from this time of wrath and judgment that Israel was warned to flee.

Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Matthew 3:5-7

In the book of Acts God pronounced a final, scathing condemnation of Israel. This condemnation came in the message Stephen preached to the wicked leadership of the nation.

Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. Acts 7:51-58

In Stephen's stoning we see his description of Christ "standing" on the right hand of God. This posture is an important indication of what events were to come next.

The LORD standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people. Isaiah 3:13

Through the ministries of men like Peter and Stephen, Christ was pleading with the nation Israel to repent of their sins and turn back to God. With Stephen's final condemnation of the backslidden nation, and his proclamation that they were "uncircumcised in heart and ears," the time had come for them to be judged along with the Gentile nations.

Saving the Chief of Sinners

What happened next is truly amazing. Rather than

pouring out wrath and judgment on the world, as the prophets had predicted, God reached down in mercy and grace to save the chief of sinners, the leader of Israel's rebellion against Him.

And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. Acts 9:1-6

God saved Saul, who later became Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, to be a demonstration of His mercy and grace. He called Paul to take the message of forgiveness to a world that deserved judgment.

And I [Saul] said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. Acts 26:15-18

And I [Paul] thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. I Timothy 1:12-16

For I [Paul] speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: Romans 11:13

Local churches sprang up because of the message of grace that Paul proclaimed among the Gentiles in his extensive travels.

And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches. Acts 15:40,41

The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. I Corinthians 16:19

Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; II Corinthians 8:1

And all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia: Galatians 1:2

Twenty times in Paul's epistles, he refers to "churches," indicating the independent nature of each local assembly. In the book of Romans, Paul refers to these local churches as the "churches of the Gentiles." In the prophetic program of time past God intended to bless the Gentiles through the rise and blessing of Israel. Now with Israel in absolute rebellion against God and the world braced to taste the unmixed wrath of God, we see God do a marvelous work of grace among the Gentiles. In spite of Israel's obstinate unbelief God saves all who come to Him by faith whether Jew or Gentile. This is truly a revolutionary development in God's dealings with man!

God Manifest in the Flesh

The establishment of these local churches is even more revolutionary when we realize that they are the visible manifestation of a new creation; the Church, the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ has replaced Israel as God's vehicle for reaching the Gentiles. God no longer works through a chosen, separated nation. He no longer dwells in a temple in Jerusalem. He dwells today in the Church, the Body of Christ, a new entity formed by reconciling Jews and Gentiles together in Christ.

Now therefore ye [Gentiles] are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit. Ephesians 2:19-22

As members of the Body of Christ, we are the habitation of God in the world. This is in marked contrast to Paul's description of the Gentiles in Ephesians 2:12 (quoted above) where he says that in time past the Gentiles were, "without God in the world." Today, as a part of the Body of Christ, Gentiles are manifesting God in the flesh.

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory. I Timothy 3:14-16

When Paul says the church is, "God manifest in the flesh", and, "the pillar and ground of the truth," it is in the context of the selection of leaders in the local church. These local, self-governing churches represent the will and work of God on planet earth today. It is in these churches that God is visibly manifest in the flesh.

The Churches of the Gentiles

Considering the far-reaching impact of the phrase, "the churches of the Gentiles," it is clear that it was used by God to intentionally communicate a revolutionary truth. Today God manifests His life and purpose on the earth through the Church, the Body of Christ. As described in Paul's epistles, the visible manifestation of this Church is found in local assemblies; the churches of the Gentiles.

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