

Lessons from Israel 1

The figure of Israel 1

There are certain passages of scripture that have lingered in my mind over the past few months.

They have caused me to ask questions and forced me to dig a little deeper.

I want to begin this series on lessons from Israel with one of those passages. I hope it will cause all of us to ask questions and dig deeper.

It comes within the context of a passage we know to be about faith. The chapter defines faith for us and reacquaints us with men and women that figure prominently in the history of Israel - and therefore figure prominently in the history of Christianity.

They are people who, as this passage says "all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off."

They are Old Testament saints that serve as New Testament examples.

Those mentioned by name in Hebrews 11, will be mentioned again (by us) in this series.

But there were some that had to be described this way, starting in verse 32:

32 ¶ And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets:

33 Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,

34 Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

35 Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection:

36 And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:

37 They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;

38 (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

39 ¶ And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise:

40 God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

How can you read this and not want to know more?

- We want to know about the character of these people and what contributed to building it
- We want to know about the power that gave them victory against the odds
- We want to know about the moments in which they could have "accepted deliverance," but didn't
- We want to see what they were doing and how they are thinking in their torment and wandering
- We want to know about the people who carried out the persecutions
- And we want to know why the "world was not worthy"

The opening chapters of Acts in the New Testament tell of persecutions.

One of the most dramatic sermons in Acts is by Stephen, he says in chapter 7, verse 51:

51 ¶ Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.

52 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:

53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

Stephen brings the painful reminder that the Savior and His faithful were unjustly treated, while remaining obedient:

- In the time looking forward to His coming
- At His arrival
- Through His life
- To His death
- And after His victorious resurrection

In the very moments after these words were spoken, in Acts 7:54 we read:

54 ¶ When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.

55 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,

56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

57 ¶ Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

58 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.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

“He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” John 1:11

We must see two distinct elements of Israel’s story (and the story of mankind) in the death of this first New Testament martyr:

The first is man’s tendency (often violently) to reject Him. The second is man’s ability (with His power) to faithfully serve Him.

Both are on simultaneous display in these stories and in the history of Israel.

Lessons from Israel are righteousness and desperate wickedness. They are full commitment and unthankful disregard. They are unqualified victory and self-inflicted calamity.

Why would this opening lesson be called the figure of Israel?

The verb figure is defined: ‘Have a significant part or role in a situation or process.’

Here’s a sample sentence containing ‘figure’ by this definition. I used it earlier:

“The chapter defines faith for us and reacquaints us with men and women that figure prominently in the history of Israel - and therefore figure prominently in the history of Christianity.”

They have a significant part or role...

Israel has a significant part or role in God’s plan for man. There is, in fact, no separating Israel from the gospel and from New Testament Christianity. They are inextricably intertwined.

Let's demonstrate this by approaching the incarnation. See Luke 2:21-35:

21 ¶ And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

22 ¶ And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord;

23 (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;)

24 And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.

Can you see it? A Hebrew virgin, delivered of a child - the promised child, Messiah - does according to the law of Moses. That which was required for Israel is done.

25 ¶ And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

This just and devout man had been looking forward. He was waiting with anticipation for the One who had been promised.

You will probably recognize the word used in “consolation of Israel” - *paraklēsis*. It is “a calling near, summons, (esp. for help).”

In this context, it is speaking of “consolation, comfort, solace; that which affords comfort or refreshment” and “thus of the Messianic salvation (so the Rabbis call the Messiah the consoler, the comforter).”

26 And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

This must have been an amazing moment.

The covering provided by the sacrifice of animals would no longer be needed. For the blood of this perfect, spotless sacrifice would wash away all sin and provide the way of salvation!

He would draw near to Israel and (as we will see) to all men.

27 And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

28 Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

29 Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:

30 For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,

31 Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
32 A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

This light that was come into the world would not only comfort Israel, but would also do as it says in Isaiah 49:6:

6 And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.

Simeon recognized this. He acknowledged what it meant for him, for his people, and for the world.

John 3 provides more details:

18 ¶ He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

19 And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

20 For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

21 But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

This was no doubt the One who would bless all the nations of the world - as Abraham had been promised.

He would provide the salvation that was seen "afar off" by the faithful through Israel's history.

33 ¶ And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.

34 And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

35 (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

We approach these lessons from Israel understanding that they will reveal much about us, much about the world we live in, and much about our Savior. I hope you'll be able to join us.