

Exit Strategy

The Future of Israel – Part V

Romans 11:25-32

Introduction

I received a *Wall Street Journal* article recently from someone in our church. He often passes articles on to me that may serve as a sermon illustration. I value that because it keeps me aware of certain issues and events without having to read a lot of unnecessary things.

By the way, if you read a magazine or a newspaper article that you think might fit as a biblical subject application or illustration, please send a copy to me. However, please do not ask for a response from me or I will never have time to read it.

This article tweaked my interest and, after only a little research, I came up with several other articles that used the phrase, “exit strategy”.

One article talked about our “exit strategy from Iraq”. The author proposed three steps which needed to be taken. He warned, however, that exiting Iraq would require coordination, dedication, and planning – as if we could not have guessed that all by ourselves.

Another use of the phrase, “exit strategy” was related to the selling of a business. This article basically dealt with how to sell your business and get the most out of it as you exit.

The article from my friend had an interesting twist. A physicist wrote the following in the commentary section,

One of the hottest topics being debated in D.C. is an exit strategy from Iraq. But no matter how difficult this may be, physicists are struggling with an even greater exit

strategy. The latest data from space satellites are unmistakable; the universe will eventually die – in a Big Freeze. Galaxies are being pushed apart. Some day, when looking heavenward, we will be quite lonely, with other galaxies too far away to be observed. Worse, it will be deathly cold. As the universe accelerates, temperatures will plunge throughout the universe. Billions of years from now, the stars will have exhausted their nuclear fuel, the oceans will freeze, the sky will become totally dark, and the universe will consist of dead neutron stars, black holes, and nuclear debris. Is all intelligent life on earth doomed to die when the universe itself perishes? It seems as if the iron laws of physics have issued a death warrant. But there is still one possible exit strategy; to leave the universe itself. Do the laws of physics allow for the creation of wormholes connecting our universe to a younger, more hospitable universe? In 2021, a new space probe, LISA (Laser Interferometer Space Antenna) will be launched which may be able to prove or disprove these conjectures. Can a gateway be built to connect our universe with another? For intelligent life, there is no choice. Either we leave for [another] universe, or we die in the old one.ⁱ

How good is this? I love it when the *Wall Street Journal* preaches our message. Although it came up with the wrong conclusion, it has the right idea.

Planet earth and the universe around it will not last forever. According to II Peter, chapter 3, we are

told that God did not create it to last forever. Listen as Peter explains, in verses 5b through 13:

. . . by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. . . . in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. . . . the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

The physicist is right – intelligent life needs an exit strategy! He is wrong, however, on how and why. According to the Bible, the present heavens and the earth are headed, not for a big freeze, but a big fire.

The judgment of God is reserved until the point at which everything will be destroyed. What hope does humanity have with a dying planet and a condemned universe and a God not only powerful enough to destroy it, but promising to do just that? What is God’s exit strategy for the human race?

God’s Exit Strategy for the Human Race

As the apostle Paul brings his discussion on the nation Israel to a close in Romans, chapter 11, he provides several insights into God’s plan for the ages – God’s exit strategy for His people that has been unfolding for centuries.

Three thoughts about God’s exit strategy for His people

Let me give three thoughts about God’s exit strategy for His people.

For the Gentiles, God’s exit strategy is an ongoing gathering

1. First, for the Gentiles, it is an ongoing gathering (Romans 11:25).

Notice verse 25a.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery . . .

This “mystery” refers to the plan and purpose of God which was hidden in the past and is impossible for human beings to discover apart from further revelation from God.ⁱⁱ

In other words, prior to Paul writing on this mystery, there was no way for anyone to figure it out on their own.

The word “mystery” or “mysterion” is used several times in the New Testament to refer to truth that was previously not known or was known but not fully understood. References include:

- the mystery of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13);
- the mystery of the union of Jews and Gentiles into one body (Ephesian 3:3);
- the mystery of the temporary setting aside of the nation Israel (Romans 11);
- the mystery of Christ and His bride (Ephesians 5:32);
- the mystery of the rapture (I Corinthians 15:51);
- the mystery of lawlessness and the antichrist (II Thessalonians 2:7).

So what is the mystery that Paul intends to explain in Romans, chapter 11?

Look at verse 25b.

. . . that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

The exit strategy of God for the Gentile is an ongoing ingathering of believers, which Paul refers to as the fullness of the Gentiles becoming finished.

The completion of the bride of Christ – largely a Gentile bride – initiates the returned focus of God on Israel. The salvation of Israel; that is, the remnant that survives the tribulation and sees Christ coming in the clouds, will initiate the literal thousand year kingdom.

Now, this is not a course of prophecy, but I cannot resist entirely.

You need to understand that the New Testament refers to “*the times of the Gentiles*” and “*the fullness of the Gentiles*”. They are two different things.

“The times of the Gentiles” has to do with the period which began with Gentile rule through Nebuchadnezzar and will end with the literal return

of Christ to defeat His enemies and assume the throne of David. In other words, “the times of the Gentiles” refers to political domination.

“The fullness of the Gentiles” refers to the present dispensation, during which God’s Spirit is calling primarily a Gentile bride for God’s Son. Peter addressed this at the beginning of the church era when he said in Acts, chapter 15, verse 14,

God is visiting the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name.ⁱⁱⁱ

“The times of the Gentiles” refers to political domination. But “the fullness of the Gentiles” refers to spiritual deliverance – the calling of Gentiles chosen by God who make up the bride of Christ.

Notice again that Paul says in verse 25b,

. . . that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

In other words, when the bride of Christ is completed, the focus on Gentiles ends and the focus returns to the nation Israel.

The present age is a period of Gentile ingathering. Paul clearly says it is going to end, when he says,

. . . the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

Now, according to many other passages, a number of things are going to take place between verse 25 and verse 26 of Romans, chapter 11. These include:

- the rapture of the church (I Thessalonians 4);
- the rise of Antichrist (II Thessalonians 2);
- the tribulation and purification of Israel (Daniel 12 and Zechariah 13);
- the sealing and explosive ministry of Jewish evangelists who turn the remnant of Israel toward the gospel of Messiah.

The hardening of Israel to the gospel will remain until Christ’s church is completed and the New Testament saints are raptured to heaven. We happen to be waiting for the next event on the prophetic calendar – the rapture of this completed bride of Christ.

Paul expected it to happen in his own lifetime. He writes to the Thessalonian believers, in I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 15 through 17,

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede

those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up . . .

(the Latin verb for “caught up” is “rapturo” – from this, we get our word “rapture,” which means, “caught away”),

. . . together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

How is that for the ultimate exit strategy?! Talk about a strange doctrine to our world today! This is people vanishing into thin air!

One man recently wrote *Christianity Today* of his amazement that anyone would believe such a thing. He wrote,

Seriously people! Hoping the rapture will happen won’t make it happen. Wanting to believe it will happen won’t make it happen. We can speculate until the cows come home about what will happen. There is no room in the laws of physics for people to vanish into thin air.

Oh? What about the physicist I read from earlier who thinks there are parallel universes we cannot even see – and that our only hope is to somehow travel from one dimension to the next.

That is his hope. This Bible is mine. This is my exit strategy!

Now just when will the rapture take place? And how does it fit within the events of the tribulation and future kingdom?

My short answer is that the rapture occurs sometime before the tribulation period begins.

Paul writes to the Corinthian believers about the rapture. He says in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 51 and 52,

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

In I Thessalonians, we have a reference to a shout which precedes or accompanies the rapture. In these verses to the Corinthians, we have a reference to the last trumpet.

I believe both the shout and the trumpet can only be understood in light of Jewish and Roman culture.

The rapture and future of the church parallels a Jewish wedding remarkably well.

Jesus Christ explained to His disciples in John, chapter 14, that He was going away to prepare a place for them in His Father's house. He would then come to receive them and take them back to the Father's house and they would remain by His side forever.

The analogy of this promise to a Jewish wedding process in Christ's day is remarkable. In the days of Christ, a bridegroom traveled from his father's house to the home of the prospective bride, where he would negotiate the purchase price for his bride. Once the price was established and the bridegroom paid the purchase price (the "mohar"), the marriage covenant was established and the young man and woman were betrothed – literally considered husband and wife. From this moment on, the bride was declared to be set apart for her bridegroom.

After the marriage covenant was established, the groom left his bride at her home and returned to his father's house. There, he literally built on to his father's house a home for his bride. This also afforded the bride an opportunity to prepare herself and her trousseau for married life.

At the end of an undesignated time of separation, the groom came, usually at night, to take his bride to live with him. The groom, the best man, and other male attendants left the groom's father's house and would conduct a happy, festive torch-lit journey to the home of the bride. Also, though the bride was expecting her groom to come for her, she did not know the exact time of his arrival. As a result, the groom's arrival would be preceded by shouting. It definitely woke up the neighborhood. In fact, the neighborhood usually joined in as the groom received his bride and her attendants. Then, an enlarged wedding party returned from the bride's home to the groom's father's house. Before too long, the couple were escorted to the bridal chamber (the "huppah"), where the marriage was physically consummated. Once consummated, the feasting began.

The wedding guests – the families and extended family and friends – enjoyed seven days of feasting together while the bride and groom enjoyed a private seven day honeymoon. After seven days, the bride and groom reappeared, with the bride, for the first time, unveiled for all the wedding guests to see.

The analogy is not hard to follow. Christ has come to pay the purchase price. Paul wrote, in I Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 19 and 20,

. . . do you not know . . . that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price . . .

Just as the Jewish bride was declared set apart after the price had been paid, so the church has been declared sanctified or set apart exclusively for Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27).

The promise of Christ to leave His Father's house to come and receive them and take them back to His prepared home for them is perfectly analogous to the groom going to get his bride and taking her back to the place he has built for their new family. In the same way that the Jewish groom's arrival was preceded by a shout, so Christ's arrival to take the church home will be preceded by a shout (I Thessalonians 4:16).

Christ and the church remain hidden for seven years, celebrating the feasting of the marriage supper and other events, which is perhaps, illustrated in the seven days of the honeymoon for the Jewish bride and groom. Then, after seven days, just as the bride and groom appeared with the bride unveiled, so Christ shall appear and we will appear with Him in glory (Colossians 3:4).^{iv}

This analogy supports the view called *pre-tribulationism*. You need to know that for the test!

There is also a view called *post-tribulationism* which is the belief that Christ will do all of this after the tribulation.

Let me take a moment to define these views.

- The pretribulationist view believes the rapture will occur pre-tribulation, or before the tribulation.
- The posttribulationist view holds that the rapture will occur post-tribulation, or after the tribulation.

There are some pre-tribulationists who are so committed that they will not even eat Post Toasties.

The problem with the post-tribulationist view is the number of scriptures that promise the church a deliverance from the wrath or judgment of God.

I Thessalonians, chapter 1, verse 10, clearly states that Jesus Christ will,

. . . rescue us from the wrath to come.

"From the wrath," means literally, "out of the wrath," not through the wrath, but removed from the

wrath of God. Later, in chapter 5, verse 9, we are told that God,

. . . has not destined us [the church] for wrath . . .

That is parallel language to Revelation, chapter 3, verse 10, where the church is promised to be kept from the hour of testing, as John writes,

. . . that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.

The post-tribulationist will respond somewhat cynically to the pre-tribulationist by saying, “You want to interpret these passages the way you do simply because you don’t want to experience the wrath of God unleashed on the earth.”

Hey, they’re right?! You had better believe it!

I happen to believe that salvation *is* deliverance from the wrath of God in any form. Discipline and wrath; persecution and God’s wrath are two different things.

However, let us not be so Western in our interpretation of scripture. To say that I am a pre-tribulationist because I do not want the church to go through tribulation would be to ignore what is happening around the world right now.

Say to the Chinese believer, “Hey, you want to believe in a pre-tribulationist rapture because you want to escape trouble?”

He would say, “What do you call this that I’m currently enduring?”

Say that to the Sudanese believer. They are experiencing incredible tribulation.

These people long to be rescued from their persecutors. However, the tribulation that they are currently enduring is different from the tribulation described in Revelation where billions of people will die in a few year’s time.

Let me briefly give one more view. Another view regarding the rapture of the church is the *pre-wrath rapture*.

This view divides the tribulation into three sections and claims that the church is raptured before the third section of the tribulation. The third section begins with the breaking of the seventh seal and the outpouring of divine wrath. They claim that the wrath of God does not really occur until past the midway point of the tribulation and therefore, the church can be raptured well within the time of

tribulation and still not experience the great wrath of God.

The trouble with this view is that at the breaking of the first six seals, the church evidently experiences what is certainly considered in Revelation to be a time of wrath. John writes in Revelation, chapter 6, verses 16 and 17, before the seventh seal is broken,

and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come . . .

One interesting point is the fact that Paul speaks of the rapture in I Corinthians, chapter 15, as an event preceded by the last trumpet. But in Revelation, there are trumpets blown during the tribulation, to signal special wrath from God.

In other words, how can we be raptured before the tribulation with the sound of the last trumpet, if trumpets are going to be sounded during the tribulation? Obviously the last trumpet is not the last trumpet. The answer lies within our historical approach to scripture.

First of all, Paul did not explain to the Corinthians what he meant when he talked about the rapture being preceded by the last trumpet, because they did not need an explanation. If it was as complicated as the pre-wrath folks teach, they would have needed an explanation about where this particular trumpet blast fit within the seventh seal.

Secondly, the book of Revelation had not been written yet, so they would not have known about the seven trumpets of the seventh seal.

There are at least two explanations as to why the Corinthians did not need an explanation.

First, many believe this last trumpet fit within the framework of the Jewish Feast of Trumpets. The Jewish practice involved blowing trumpets at this feast each year. During the ceremony, there was a series of short trumpet blasts of various lengths, concluding with the longest blast of all, called the “tekiah gedolah,” or the last trump.

Judaism connected this last trump with the resurrection of the dead, and so does Paul. So, from this Jewish perspective, Paul is simply saying the rapture will be the fulfillment of the Feast of Trumpets when, as he writes in I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 16b through 17,

. . . the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up

together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air . . .

The other explanation lies in the Roman culture. In I Corinthians, chapter 14, the chapter just before Paul's reference to the last trumpet, Paul refers to the military trumpet. He said, in verse 8, paraphrased,

. . . if the trumpet does not give a distinctive or definite sound, the troops will not prepare for battle.

In Paul's day, the Roman army was called to battle by the first trumpet. One author wrote, "It called the soldiers together to go forth to battle, while the last trumpet, which made a deep sound, signaled them to end the battle and reassemble to return to camp or to return home."

In other words, the phrase, "the last trumpet of God," may have been understood as a military expression. It is not the last time a trumpet is sounded, but it will be that trumpet sound which signals the end of the battle. This is the trumpet that signals the end of the believer's battle against Satan and his forces. He can take off his helmet and breastplate . . . he does not need his weapons any more . . . he is being called to assemble with Christ to go home!^v

Either perspective, Jewish or Roman, explains that the end of the Gentile ingathering is marked by a trumpet call from the Bridegroom and a shout that He is on His way. Then, the church is taken up, back to the Father's house, and the judgment of God on planet earth, which results in Israel's redemption, begins.

This is the exit strategy. For the Gentiles, it is the rapture, and for now, it is still an ongoing gathering.

One day, however, it will end – when the bride of Christ is complete. Are you a part of it?! Are you a member of the church – the bride of Christ?!

For the Jew, God's exit strategy is a soon coming kingdom

2. Secondly, for the Jews, the exit strategy of God is a soon coming kingdom (Romans 11:26-27).

The kingdom will last a thousand years. The Jews who survive the tribulation will comprise the nation Israel, even though millions of them, like half the population of the world, will be killed.

This Jewish remnant will be a testimony of God's faithfulness. He has kept His covenant – there will be Israel's promised land.

While a Gentile believer is called at times, "a son of Abraham," or "a true Israelite," such expressions relate to the fact that Gentile believers are related to the God of Abraham; we too, are people of God by our faith.

These Gentile expressions do not in any way mean that Israel is now dissolved. In fact, the very thing covenant theology does, in the dissolving of Israel's future, is warned against at the beginning of this paragraph in Romans. Look back at verse 25b,

. . . so that you will not be wise in your own estimation – that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles . . .

It is only temporary! The Gentile is not to become presumptuous or proud in believing he has replaced the Israelite. Israel will have their land; their throne; their temple; their King.

Let me give one more point in God's end-time strategy.

For the world at large, God's exit strategy is an oft-repeated invitation

3. Thirdly, for the world at large, God's exit strategy is an oft-repeated invitation (Romans 11:28-32).

You will find the word "mercy" several times in the last few verses of this paragraph in Romans. Notice verses 30 through 32.

For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all.

Summary of Romans Chapter 11

If I could summarize Romans chapter 11 with three statements, it would be these:

- The aim of God is unstoppable;
- The assurances from God are irrevocable;
- Our appointment with God is inescapable.

Eventually, every living human being of all time will have his appointment with God. As Hebrews, chapter 9, verse 27, says,

. . . it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,

For the believer, there will be the judgment seat of Christ, where Christ will reward the believer's righteous deeds.

For the unbeliever, there will be the great white throne of judgment, where God will condemn him for his unbelief. He had creation and he ignored it. He had his conscience and he violated it. He worshiped tangible gods and refused to acknowledge creator God.

There will be no mercy then. It will be forever too late.

However, for now, while you are here and listening in the midst of Christ's still incomplete bride, there is hope. Who knows, you may be the last member to be added. Do not wait.

You are holding us all back! Do not hold up the party!

Now! Accept the invitation to place your faith in Christ alone. Get out of the funeral procession of the

world, headed for the land of eternal death, and get into the wedding procession, headed for the land of eternal life.

Earlier I read the question asked by an intelligent, bright, desperately concerned physicist, "Can a gateway be built to travel from our universe to another?"

The answer is, "Yes."

Jesus Christ said, as recorded in John, chapter 14, verses 1 through 3, paraphrased,

Don't be troubled . . . I am going to My Father's house to build a place for you . . . and I'll come back and take you to be with Me, that where I am, there you will be also.

It is true, even though there are those who tell us it will not happen. Some day; one day; maybe this day, the believer will disappear!

How is that for an exit strategy – being whisked away; a new home; a new earth; a new heaven (Revelation 21)?!

Accept Him before you die and it is too late, or before the trumpet sounds and the church vanishes into thin air.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/23/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ "Huddled up with LISA," The Wall Street Journal Online (Jan. 20, 2005).

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon L. Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Zondervan/Regency, 1976), p. 374.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 175.

^{iv} Renald Showers, Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! (The Friends of Israel, 1995), p. 164.

^v Ibid., p. 285.