

Green with Envy

The Future of Israel – Part III

Romans 11:11-15

Interpreting the Bible - Covenant Theology or Dispensationalism?

Our study today is a foundational study that is necessary in the understanding of Romans, chapter 11.

Within the evangelical world, there are two major systems of interpreting the Bible. One is known as covenant theology and the other as dispensationalism.

Covenant theology is a system which spiritualizes the covenant promises to Israel and applies them to the church. In this view, there is no future place for the nation Israel, no rapture of the church and, according to many, no literal kingdom on earth.

Dispensationalism is simply a title for interpreting scripture in a way that recognizes distinctive periods of time throughout human history. During these times, God made certain demands on humanity and humanity was responsible to God in certain and special ways. This interpretation approaches the scriptures historically, grammatically, and theologically in order to consistently discover what the Bible meant to its first readers and then, what it means to us.

Frankly, I have never met a Christian who is not in some way, a dispensationalist. In fact, if you are wearing clothing that mixes cotton and wool, you evidently believe God is holding you to a different requirement during this period of time than He held the Old Testament Jew who was not allowed to worship God while wearing mixed fabrics.

Furthermore, if you ate ham sometime during the past holiday, you evidently believe God is no longer holding you responsible to the dietary laws of the old economy or the old dispensation.

If you also decided to ask God to forgive some sin that you committed this past week by simply praying to Him through Christ, and you did not show up this morning with a turtle dove or a goat or some flour or meal to sacrifice for that sin, you have proven, by all of these acts, that you believe in at least three dispensations. They include the dispensation periods of:

- after Adam and before Moses;
- after Moses and before Christ;
- after Christ's death on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins (thus ending the sacrificial requirement of the earlier dispensation).

Add to this the fact that Paul used the Greek word "oikonomia" to refer to a future dispensation of management under God's authority, that I am sure you believe in, when he wrote to the Ephesians, in chapter 1, verses 9 and 10.

He [God] made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him, with a view to an administration . . .

("administration" is the word, and that phrase can be translated, "with a view to a dispensation"),

. . . suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ,

things in the heavens and things on the earth. . . .

In other words, if you believe you will one day no longer live under the restraints of the flesh, but will have a glorified body and live in heaven, in the literal presence of God, embodied in Christ, then you also happen to believe in yet another future eternal dispensation.

So there are at least four distinct, different epochs of administration or management in which God required certain things from mankind, and mankind, by faith in God's word, responded by faith.

Whether you realized it or not, you were benefiting by the application of dispensational truth.

One of the arguments used by our Christian friends within the covenant theology camp, is that dispensationalism is something relatively new. However, the word dispensation itself is actually found nine times in the New Testament. It is the Greek word "oikonomia," which is often translated, "stewardship" or "management".

The apostle Paul used the word several times to refer to the present dispensation, which is known as "the age of grace," or "the dispensation of the gospel or of the church". He writes in Ephesians, chapter 3, verse 2, of,

. . . the stewardship [dispensation] of God's grace . . .

In I Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 17, Paul talks about the,

. . . stewardship entrusted . . .

. . . or the "oikonomia," the dispensation of the gospel that has been entrusted to him as he preaches.

The charge that dispensations is a new idea is simply unfounded. It is a New Testament concept.

Study the response of the early church to this idea. Travel back to the time of:

- Justin Martyr, who lived from 110 to 165, and spoke of this present dispensation;
- Irenaeus, who lived fifty years later, and spoke of the dispensations of God, and especially of the Christian dispensation;
- Clement of Alexandria, who led the church in 200 A.D., and distinguished three different dispensations.

How could anyone criticize dispensationalism as new when the great thinker and church leader St.

Augustine wrote these interesting words in the fourth century,

The institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now. God, who knows infinitely better than man what is fitting for every age, is ordering all events in His providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, each part of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some wise master of song.ⁱ

The idea of dispensations is anything but new. The charge of newness, however, comes from the fact that the different dispensations presented in scripture became organized into a system of interpreting scripture known as dispensationalism, in the seventeenth century.

The finger is most often pointed at John Darby, who lived in the early 1800's, as the founder of dispensationalism. That is erroneous. Two hundred years before Darby, John Edwards published two volumes of nearly eight hundred pages, entitled, *A Complete Survey of All the Dispensations*.ⁱⁱ

A little later, in the mid-1700's, the famous hymn writer and theologian Isaac Watts, wrote an essay entitled, "The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all His Dispensations Towards Them."

That sounds like exciting reading, doesn't it?!

In this essay, Isaac Watts went on to outline his dispensational theology. That outline was later given one additional point and then, printed in notes of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. In other words, Scofield did not use Darby's outline, but Isaac Watts'.

Now this is where it really gets interesting. Our friends and brothers in Christ, the covenant theologians, write off dispensationalism because it is new. Yet, a study of the development of covenant theology reveals that it also was organized as a system of interpreting scripture by a few key men – men like Johannes Cocceius in the mid-1600's and Hermann Witsius, who popularized it in the 1700's.ⁱⁱⁱ

The interesting thing is that both dispensational theology and covenant theology were organized as systems of interpreting scripture within one hundred years of one another. In fact, around the same time that the "Westminster Confession of Faith" was written (a document revered by covenant theology), a reformed theologian, Pierre Poiret, published a six-volume set in which he presented a "fully

systematized teaching on premillennial dispensationalism with six distinct dispensation.”^{iv}

In other words, both systems were developed around the same time in church history.

Today we might wonder, “Why all the hubbub and deliberation over systems of interpreting scripture?”

The reason is, as James Orr pointed out in his book, *The Progress of Dogma or Doctrine*, the church throughout her history, has studied the great doctrines almost one at a time, not all at once. The church studied apologetics, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of salvation, and finally, after the reformation, the doctrine of future events.

In order to interpret prophecy especially, the church needed a system of interpretation. Think about it, if you are going to study mathematics, you need a system of measurements and rules and formulas. Likewise, in order to study prophecy, the church developed what it would need – a system. However, two different systems were developed for interpreting scripture and prophecy – one known as covenant theology, and the other as dispensationalism.

You might ask, “Which one is right?”

Actually, the answer to that question is another question, “What do the scriptures say?”

What do the scriptures say in answer to questions such as, “Is there a literal rapture? . . . a literal kingdom? . . . a literal beginning to a kingdom and end to a kingdom? . . . a literal tribulation?” and so on?

I believe the scriptures, as we will see in a moment, support the literal, grammatical, historical theological system of interpreting scripture known as dispensational theology.

Now let me deliver a word of warning to all of us, regardless of whether we are a covenant theologian or a dispensationalist. Both systems are evangelical; both systems exalt the grace of God; both systems revere the scriptures; both systems hold high the Lord Jesus and His sovereignty. In other words, this is a family debate.

I say that as a reminder that we had better be careful of charging something as wrong simply because it has been organized in the last few centuries. To use that argument against one another falls into the very same argument of the Roman Catholic church against the evangelical church.

“You’re new. So you can’t be right. You Protestants got organized in the sixteenth century and we’ve been around since the third century, so we’re right and you’re wrong.”

That is their argument. I have heard it over and over again from Roman Catholics with whom I have shared the gospel – “You’re new and we go all the way back to Rome.”

Listen, if something in the church is wrong, which the reformers attempted to change in the sixteenth century, it does not slowly become right over time – it is just old error. A lie that has been around for a long time, for example, is still a lie. Now, in fact, it is just an old lie.

By the way, John Calvin and all the other reformers, faced again and again this charge of being new. They answered that just because something was taught in the third century did not make it right, and the fact that something was not taught until the seventeenth century did not make it wrong.

The axiom of truth is not, “Old is better . . . purer . . . more right.”

If old is better than new, then we all need to be Amish. Think of the anxiety it would have saved us during all the panic of Y2K. Do you remember that phrase, “You ready for the year 2000?” The Amish were Y2K ready.

If old is better, then why not go back to the days of Whitefield and Wesley. We would have ridden our horses to church this morning, and we would all be sitting on benches without backs. Ushers would be walking the aisles during my sermon, with a long reed to crack over the heads of kids who are fidgeting and to poke adults who are sleeping. I like that part.

The question to ask is not, “Is it old?” but, “Is it biblical?”

By the way, that question relates to much more than dispensationalism and covenant theology. That question impacts every aspect of your life. For example:

- How are you going to raise your children? What does the Bible say?
- How are you going to relate to the opposite sex? What does the Bible say?
- How are you going to spend your money? What does the Bible say?
- How are you going to make decisions regarding lifestyle and holy pursuits? Does the Bible say anything about it?

The issue is not “What is the latest Christian fancy?” or “What did your grandparents do?” The issue is, “What do the scriptures say?”

Now, as it relates to these two systems of interpretation, the key division between covenant theology and dispensationalism is the issue of Israel.

Covenant theology says God is finished with Israel as a nation. There is no future for the nation.

Dispensational theology says God is not finished with Israel as a nation. There is a future for the nation.

The question remains, “What do the scriptures say?”

What do the Scriptures say about Israel’s future?

The key passage that addresses the question of national Israel’s future is found in the book of Romans. Chapter 9 has dealt with Israel’s past; chapter 10 deals with Israel’s present; and chapter 11, where we stopped in our previous study, deals with Israel’s future.

Is Israel finished or does it have a future?

Romans, chapter 11, verse 1, says,

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite . . .

This gives the idea of permanency. In other words, “God has not permanently rejected His people, has He?”

It sounds pretty clear to me.

Look at verse 11a.

I say then, they [Israel] did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! . . .

In other words, the fall of Israel is not final. Their disobedience does not destroy their covenant with God and all the literal promises to her are not transferred to the church – they still belong to Israel.

Look at verse 25.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery – so that you will be wise in your own estimation – that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

In Acts, chapter 15, verse 14, we are told that God is at this moment,

. . . taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

Israel’s hardening is partial, not total. And it is temporary, not permanent.

After God redeems Gentiles from every nation, tongue, and tribe, Israel will have the blinders removed and the hardening of their hearts will be replaced with faith. When they see the Son coming in the clouds at the end of the tribulation, the One whom they pierced, Israel as a nation will be saved – verse 26 of Romans, chapter 11, says it is true. Many within Israel will not believe, according to the judgment of Jewish rebels at the beginning of the Kingdom, but the nation as a whole will be saved.

In Romans, chapter 11, beginning with verse 11, Paul explains what God intends to do during this temporary setting aside of Israel and the temporary dispensation of the church age. There are at least two purposes of God:

1. To proclaim salvation to Gentile nations by means of the church.
2. To provoke jealousy in the Israelite nation because of the church.

Now let us read the paragraph beginning with verse 11.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

Their transgression is the rejection of the Messiah. Continue to verses 12 and 13.

Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,

Paul is saying that he is thrilled to be an ambassador of Christ to the Gentile people. Continue to verses 14 and 15.

If somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

In other words, when they return to God, it will be like the prodigal son who returned to his father and the father said, “this son of mine was dead and has come to life again” (Luke 15:24).

Two things are happening in this Romans text:

1. Salvation is being proclaimed to Gentile nations by means of the church.

The church composed of Jew and Gentile is now the conduit of God's redemption for the nations.

2. Jealousy is being provoked in the Israelite nation because of the church.

The word for jealousy is not entirely negative. On one hand, it means a form of envy, as some translations word it, and it is envy in wanting something for themselves that they see someone else having. On the other hand, Paul used the same word to encourage the believer to earnestly long for spiritual gifts that will edify the body of Christ.

So the Jew will earnestly long for what he envies in the believer's life. This includes things like personal communion with God, freedom from the guilt of sin, and the assurance of eternal heaven. Those are a few of our "riches" that Paul implies in Romans, chapter 11, verse 12.

In other words, you could say that these riches of joy, communion, forgiveness, and security of the believing Gentile make the Israelite nation green with envy. They have got to have it!

We know that during the tribulation period, as God shifts to the calling back of Israel as a nation, millions of Jews will be saved and the leading evangelists will be 144,000 Jews who blaze a trail for the gospel like none other before them.

Application

Let me make several points of application from our study and from this Romans text.

Much of what God is accomplishing today among the Jewish people is taking place behind the scenes

1. Much of what God is accomplishing today among the Jewish people is taking place behind the scenes.

I have never had a Jewish man or woman come up to me and say, "I am so jealous of you Christians. I'm green with envy."

Yet, I have had Jews come to me after the fact and say, "I came to this church to find out what you believed because I was intrigued – and I now believe in Christ too."

Perhaps today, you are an unbelieving Gentile or an unbelieving Jew, and you have come to church to check this thing out. Listen, there are no gimmicks

here; no tricks; no cure-alls to sell; no slick side-show.

We are a congregation of sinners who are banking everything on what God has said – for our present help and our future hope. We too, are people of the book, and to us, God has promised in His book, salvation and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. We are risking everything on the basis of His word.

Everything of what God has promised the nation Israel will one day be seen as a public spectacle of God's unchanging word

2. Everything of what God has promised the nation Israel will one day be seen as a public spectacle of God's unchanging word.

It is little wonder why Satan and his kingdom would launch such violent attacks on the Jewish people. They are clearly part of God's future kingdom plan.

Even now, in Europe, the tide of anti-Semitism is once again rising at an alarming rate. Once again the lies of Jews being the agents of Satan are being promoted. This ridiculous, yet dangerous false doctrine is once again taking root in the soil of Europe. This view teaches that the Jewish people are literal descendants of the devil. They propagate the lie that Satan and Eve were involved in an illicit liaison in the Garden of Eden, which led to her expulsion. They believe that Cain was the result of that union, making the Jews then, descendants of the devil.^v

As ridiculous as this is, it is even more – it is the lie of the enemy, promoted among his true children who are blinded to the truth of the gospel and are at war with God. This is the kind of false doctrine that leads to extermination programs. As hard as it might be to imagine by most people living in rural America, there is a world of European youth in this current generation, who are once again being exposed to these false lies, and are being openly desensitized to the horrors of the past holocaust.

One article that I have had for a few years, talks about the Neo-Nazi video games which are becoming more and more popular, although their callousness toward the Jew seems inconceivable. Already popular in Germany are video games that allow the player to relive the concentration camps of Hitler and kill Jews.

You may remember the video game that was exposed recently in the news that allowed a person to

rely and actually take part in the assassination of former President John F. Kennedy. Do you remember the public outcry? As well there should be!

The Simon Wiesenthal Center counts around one hundred forty such video games in existence today. In one of the games, “KZ Manager,” players manage the Treblinka death camp where, if you remember your history, thousands of Jews were murdered by the Nazis. The game includes: points gained by the player/manager for selling gold fillings from teeth extracted from Jews, or for selling lamp shades made from the skin of dead Jews, and proceeds from these sales provide the necessary funds to buy poison gas and build additional gas chambers.

According to the Simon Wiesenthal Center, these games have now been played by one out of every four high school students, primarily in Germany and Austria. In fact, the Wiesenthal Center reports that nearly fifty percent of the teenagers in Austria have either played the games, watched the games, or have knowledge that the games exist.^{vi}

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the greatest proofs of God’s permanent covenant with Israel is the persistent attempt by Satan to destroy the Jew.

Why bother with the Jews? If God has set them aside permanently because of their rejection of their Messiah and if the church has adopted all of their blessings in some sort of spiritual way, why bother persecuting the Jew? Why is there a world-wide revulsion of this people group? Why would the devil care?

Satan cares because he takes the Bible literally! If you will allow me to use a little sarcasm, the devil is not a covenant theologian.

Of course, the bad news of my sarcasm is that that would mean the devil is a dispensationalist. I do not want to be quoted as having said that.

However, I do believe the devil and his kingdom know the scriptures well. Just look at Satan’s temptation of Christ. He quoted scripture to the Lord – twisting it ever so slightly to tempt the Lord.

I believe the devil understands the Bible as a document to be interpreted literally! He evidently understands the literal promise of the land reverting to the Jew. He has therefore fought it for centuries and still, to this day, continues to do so.

He evidently takes Christ seriously in His promise to the Jew to one day rule in a future literal kingdom, because we know from scripture that the devil will mount a worldwide attempt to keep it from happening.

One of the greatest proofs that God is not finished with Israel as a nation is the unnatural hatred for the Jew and the demonically inspired attempts throughout modern history to wipe them from the face of the earth.

God will keep His word to Israel.

Everything God has promised to the believer is just as reliable, no matter what anyone or anything seems to indicate

3. One more timeless truth is that everything God has promised to the believer is just as reliable, no matter what anyone or anything seems to indicate.

God is faithful to keep His promises to Israel.

What greater evidence then, do we as New Testament Christians need to know He will keep His word to us – as He has written to us in this dispensation, to our generation,

. . . I will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5b NKJV)

Taken against the backdrop of God’s unchanging covenant with the nation Israel, in spite of their unfaithfulness and disobedience – imagine Christian friend, your own failures will never be fatal; your own fallings are never final. Even your moments of disobedience cannot destroy God’s covenant with you through the sacrifice of His Son on your behalf.

God’s covenant of grace with you allows you to hear Him say, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Count on it; lean on it; depend upon it; hang on to it; rest in it, as that is His unchanging promise to you. It is firm and reliable!

This is the message of grace you deliver to your world.

I think of Dr. Charles Feinberg, the brilliant Jewish Bible scholar and professor. Dr. Feinberg was raised in an orthodox Jewish home that hired a “Sabbath Gentile,” a Gentile woman who was hired to serve them on the Sabbath. Her quiet testimony was appealing and unnerving . . . until finally, wealthy, sophisticated, educated Charles, went to this cleaning lady and said, “I’ve got to know what you have . . .” He eventually placed his faith in Jesus Christ as his Messiah.^{vii}

No matter who you are or where you are – live it. God will never leave you nor forsake you. His covenant with you is unbreakable!

Make sure you rejoice in it – live out your gratitude to God for His riches to you through Christ. So that others, including the Jew, might catch a glimpse of your life and turn green with envy. Maybe

they will become jealous to the point that they ask you how to get their own life-changing dose of the gospel and grace of God. They have got to have it!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/9/2005 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2005 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ Charles Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Moody Press, 1965), p. 68.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 72.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Zuck, Vital Prophetic Issues: The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology (Kregel Resources, 1995), p. 35.

^{iv} Vital Prophetic Issue, p. 35.

^v Israel My Glory (Aug./Sept. 1991), p. 24.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 24.

^{vii} R. Kent Hughes, Romans (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 196.