

Chapter 7

A Chosen People

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people on earth will be blessed through you.

~ Genesis 12:2-3 ~

Should we be striving to make the United States a moral “Christian” nation, a nation pleasing to God and a blessing to the earth? If we are doing it for our own pride, or comfort, or out of fear of what we might lose, the answer is no, we shouldn’t. Should we do it for God’s glory, then? That depends on whether it is God’s will that we do so. You see, no matter how much we try to please God by what we do, all he really *wants* us to do is what he has *asked* us to do. God has a plan for the world. He is in control. If you are at all confused about what God’s plan is for you or for our nation, all you have to do is go back to his Word and see what it tells you. No, God doesn’t talk about America in the Bible. But he does talk about his plan for the whole world. He wants us to get in line with that plan and to let him work things out his way—not ours.

A Nation and a Promise

“I will make you into a great nation.” Those words were spoken by God to Abram, a man living 4000 years ago in the city of Ur by the Euphrates River. By faith, Abram left his home and traveled to a distant land, taking with him his wife, his nephew, and all his possessions. In this new land, God gave Abram the name of Abraham—father of many—and told him his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and God would give them the whole land around him as “an everlasting possession” (Genesis 12:1-5, 15:5, 17: 3-8). God repeated this promise to

Abraham's grandson, Jacob—whom he renamed Israel:

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. (Genesis 28:13-15)

Jacob left the land of promise twice, once fleeing from his angry brother, to return years later with two wives and twelve sons, and the second time fleeing with all his family to Egypt to escape a famine. This time, Jacob did not return alive. He died in Egypt and his body was taken back to the Promised Land to be buried beside Abraham and his father Isaac. Jacob's sons and descendants remained in Egypt and eventually became slaves to the Pharaoh there. After 400 years, God sent a deliverer to lead the "Children of Israel" out of bondage and back to the land God had promised to give them.

But the children of promise had a difficult time letting God do things his way. First they demanded a new god, one made of gold, rather than wait for the true God to tell them what he wanted them to do. After destroying their golden idol, Moses gave the Israelites the laws God had provided for them. It wasn't just the Ten Commandments, either. Almost half of the book of Exodus and nearly the entire books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy contain specific regulations for living and worship the Israelites were to follow. Being led by God to the land he had promised them, the Israelites grumbled against God and repeatedly wished they had stayed in Egypt. Then, at the very border of the Promised Land, the people refused to trust God and go in and take the land. God left the people to wander in the desert for forty years until all those who had rebelled against him died. Then he led their children into the land.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. (Deuteronomy 30:15-16)

These were among the final words of Moses to the Children of Israel as they prepared their hearts and minds to do as God had commanded them and to enter the land God was giving them. Some 3000 years later these words would be echoed by the leader of another people who were being challenged to obey God's commands:

Beloved there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are Commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his Ordinance and his laws and the Articles of our Covenant with him that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it: But if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship other Gods, our pleasures, and profits, and serve them, it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good Land whether we pass over this vast Sea to possess it.¹

These were the words of John Winthrop, leader of the Puritan colonists of Massachusetts Bay Colony and their first governor in the New World. Like Moses, Winthrop reminded his people to obey God's laws and seek him first if the people would gain what God had promised them. But there was a material difference between the children of Israel and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay that John Winthrop apparently did not realize. They had been given a different promise.

The Old Covenant

The covenant made with Israel at the threshold of the Promised Land was for Israel alone. God made it clear through the Old Testament prophets that Israel had been chosen out of all the nations for a special purpose, and so the promise to Israel was available to no other nation.

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. (Deuteronomy 7:6)

He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the Lord. (Psalm 147:19-20)

You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins. (Amos 3:2)

Israel was given a promise of peace and prosperity if the nation obeyed God's laws and a promise of punishment and rejection if the nation turned from those laws. Although God judges all the nations for their sins, only Israel was given a promise of blessing for obedience. Why is this? It is because Israel was given a special *responsibility* by God. As one biblical scholar has put it, Israel had a special mission:

(1) to be the recipient and custodian of the true revelation of God (Exodus 3: Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2); (2) to exhibit to the world true religion and morality through her separation from other nations and by her obedience, righteousness, and holiness (Deut. 7:6; Lev. 20:4-26); and (3) to prepare the way for the Messiah (Gen. 12:1-3; 2 Sam. 7; Rom. 1:3; Gal. 3:16).²

The New Testament tells us that all the things that happened to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, both the blessings and the punishments, “happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11). All of the law, all of the prophecies, all of God's dealings with the Children of Israel pointed toward something that was coming: A New Covenant made possible only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Does this mean God no longer blesses faithfulness? Are his promises of peace and prosperity not available to any other nation which exhibits “obedience, righteousness and holiness”? What about the belief of our founding fathers and many of our nation's leaders that God has called the United States for a special mission, too? The only possible means of answering these questions is to look at the New Covenant God made through his son, Jesus.

The New Covenant

The New Testament book of Hebrews very carefully lays out the purpose of the Old Covenant and how it is replaced by the new. On Mount Sinai, Moses was given the commandments by which the children of Israel were to live. The commandments contained not only laws of conduct, but also laws of sacrifice—including daily sacrifices of goats and calves whose blood was shed to cover the sins of the people. Although God had offered a blessing to the people if they obeyed the law, he knew beforehand they could not obey the law perfectly, so some payment for their disobedience would be necessary. But the blood of the sacrifices did not really take away the people's sins. It was written in Psalm 40:6, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire...; burnt

offerings and sin offerings you did not require.” The law could not make the people righteous in God’s eyes; neither could the animal sacrifices. Something more was required.

To paraphrase the writer of Hebrews:

Day after day the priests stood and performed their religious duties, again and again offering the same sacrifices, which could never take away sins. But when Jesus had offered himself—for all time, one sacrifice for sins—he sat down at the right hand of God. By his one sacrifice he made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10:11-14, paraphrased)

The children of Israel were blessed by God, not because of their perfect obedience to the law or because of the blood of sacrificial animals, but because of their faith in the perfect sacrifice God had promised was to come. That perfect sacrifice was Jesus, the Son of God who never sinned and was not deserving of any punishment. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, our sins may be forgiven, not because we obey any law, but because we trust in him by faith. This is the essence of the New Covenant—faith in Jesus cleanses us perfectly from our sins and permits us to enter into the presence of God.

There are several material differences between the Old Covenant and the new. First, the New Covenant is available to “everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Romans 1:16). This is the meaning of the promise made to Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him (or, rather, his descendant, Jesus Christ). Second, where the Old Covenant was conditioned on obedience to God’s laws, the New Covenant is conditioned on faith in God’s grace. Third, where the Old Covenant promised peace and prosperity in the Promised Land, the New Covenant promises peace with God and entry into the Kingdom of God.

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. (Hebrews 7:18)

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:21-22a)

“To all who believe.” Not to any nation. Not to any particular group of people. But to all who believe. It is Christians who have been given a promise and a calling, not the United States of

America. As Christians, we are justified by faith, not by obedience to any law. No matter how much the Puritans, or the founding fathers, or Americans today try to follow John Winthrop's advice and "love the Lord our God...and to keep his Commandments and his Ordinance and his laws," God has never promised to "bless us in the land whither we go to possess it." He has given us a different promise—and a better one. He has promised us the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins by his grace and an eternal home with him.

There is one more material difference between the Old Covenant and the new—our mission. Whereas Israel was "to exhibit to the world true religion and morality through her *separation* from other nations,"³ Christians are to exhibit true religion and morality *within* the nations.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)

These were the last words of Jesus Christ after his resurrection from the dead and before he left this world to join his father in Heaven. This is known as the Great Commission. We are commanded to spread the gospel of Christ and make new disciples within the nations. We are not told to make Christian nations! A nation cannot be made a disciple any more than it can be baptized. We are to reach people within the nations, including our own, and *after* they have become disciples of Jesus we are to teach them to follow his commandments. This is not a mission for the United States or for our president or Congress or the courts. It is a commandment given to you and to me, to our churches and fellow Christians. We cannot delegate God's command and hope to appease him by simply being a "religious" and law-abiding people. In fact, if we ever were to win all the people in the United States to Christianity, we would all have to leave! Our job here would be done, and we would need to go into other nations and make disciples and baptize and teach them.

Return Not to Egypt

Like the children of Israel, many Christians stand at the threshold of what God has promised and wish for something different. The children of Israel wanted to go back to Egypt. Although they were in slavery there, at least they were safe. Out in the wilderness, the Israelites had to trust God every day to provide their food and water and to lead them forward. God laid a great burden

on their shoulders in the form of the Law, and commanded them to conquer a number of great nations and drive them out of the Promised Land. A life of slavery in Egypt suddenly seemed a lot easier.

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” (Exodus 16:2-3)

The apostle Paul tells us we were also slaves—slaves to the law. Like the children of Israel, we often find slavery to be more attractive than the freedom God offers.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.... But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? (Galatians 3:23-25, 4:9)

Paul was writing to a group of Gentile believers who were being led in the wrong direction by some bad ideas. Jewish believers had come among them and told them that to please God they had to be circumcised and follow all the law just like the Jews. Believing in Jesus to take away their sins was not enough. Paul left no doubt in his letter to the Gentiles in Galatia that this was absolutely wrong! The whole point of the law had been to show the people they were sinners in need of salvation. The point of sacrifices and special observances was to show the people that a better sacrifice was needed. Jesus provided all that was necessary to free us, not only from the penalty for our sins, but also from the heavy requirements of laws and ceremonies.

But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.... It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 4:9-11, 5:1)

The Jews had the law and their ceremonies of circumcision, sacrifices, and holy days. In America we also have our laws and our days of thanksgiving and prayer, our national motto (in God we Trust), our legislative chaplains, and our Pledge of Allegiance. These things cannot save us. They do not justify us before God. They don't even please God if we are doing them *for the wrong reason*. He has set us free from these things so we might worship him in truth, not just in some ceremonial show of outward obedience. Why then would we want to impose these empty ceremonies and useless laws of morality on the many in our country who do not know God? Wouldn't we do better to introduce them to his salvation?

But

If you are still not convinced, I can hardly blame you. We have all been raised to believe the United States was founded by God for a special purpose and God has given us a special blessing. Being “one nation, under God” has only been in the Pledge of Allegiance since 1954, but it has been a national theme since our founding. Have we been wrong all this time? Just briefly, let us consider some of these assumptions we have long held.

God brought the United States into being. Yes, he did. Doesn't that make us special? No, it doesn't. God brought *all* of the nations of the earth into being since the beginning of time.

There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13:1)

By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. (Proverbs 8:15-16)

The United States was founded by God-fearing people who wanted to build a Christian community. Yes. And no. The Puritans who founded Plymouth Plantation and Massachusetts Bay Colony certainly came to the United States to build communities based on their religious beliefs, but they didn't come alone. Many others came to the shores of America seeking wealth, land, and an opportunity to raise themselves socially in a way which was impossible in the impenetrable class structure of England and Europe. The difficult voyage to America and the rigors of living in an uncivilized land had little appeal to the gentry and nobility of England, but it had a great deal of appeal to the ambitious, the penniless, and the petty criminal who was given a choice of a

hangman's noose or passage to the New World. Considering the brutal treatment of the native peoples, the explosive growth of the slave industry, and the constant battles over land between the English colonists and their French and Spanish neighbors, our first forefathers hardly exemplified a moral and peace-loving Christian people.

God blessed us by helping us win our independence. A number of our founding fathers considered it a miracle that the thrown-together, disorganized, and minimally armed colonial militia was able to defeat the greatest army of its time and win freedom from Britain. God's obvious favor of the colonists in battle proved to them that he agreed with their cause. They equated military success with divine approval, just as we continue to equate material blessings with God's favor. But there are several flaws in this assumption.

First, as explained above, God's promise of military success and material blessings was made to Israel and to no other nation. We cannot assume from that promise that God gives material blessings to other nations as a sign of his pleasure. God is sovereign, so everything that happens in this world happens as he chooses, including the triumphs of evil men and nations. Consider Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon. Although a pagan and an exceedingly proud man, God granted him authority over the greatest kingdom of his time—perhaps of all time. The prophet Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, “The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all” (Daniel 2:37-38). God used Nebuchadnezzar like “a sword, sharpened and polished” to bring about the fall of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 21:9). Then God punished the great king for his pride (Daniel 4), and the mighty kingdom of Babylon was conquered by Cyrus of Persia, another pagan especially blessed and used by God (Isaiah 45).

Second, God tells us in his Word that material blessings are not always a measurement of righteousness. Consider Job, who was righteous in God's sight but was plagued with the loss of his property, the death of his children, and physical sufferings. When Job's friends assumed his misfortunes were a punishment from God, God was angry with them for not saying what was right about him (Job 42:7). Consider also Jesus' parable of the landowner who hired workers throughout the day to work in his vineyard. At the end of the day the landowner gave the same amount of pay to the men who had worked all day as he gave to those who worked only one hour. In responding

to the complaints of the men who worked longer, the landowner replied:

Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a certain amount? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous? (Matthew 20:13-15)

Jesus used this parable to illustrate the point that God is not keeping score and doling out to each person and each nation the reward or punishment they have earned. If this were true, we would be in big trouble, because “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), and we are all deserving of nothing but eternal punishment. But God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

Our nation was founded on Christian principles. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A republican form of government. Freedom and equality. These are supposed to be gifts from God that were given to the United States to share with the world. This is what truly sets us apart from the other nations of the world. Isn't it?

I'm afraid it would take another book to fully address this question, but for a few minutes just think about what God has to say about life, liberty, and equality in the Bible—not under the Old Covenant, but under the New. Where in the New Testament does God tell us to consider our lives to be a gift we should treasure? Did not Jesus say “whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it”? (Matthew 16:25). Did not Paul say “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”? (Galatians 2:20). And where are we told to value equality? Instead we are told: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). Wives are told to be submissive to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22). Slaves are told to be pleasing to their masters (Titus 2:9). We are encouraged to be content in all circumstances, “whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Philippians 4:12).

The Bible describes our lives here on earth like grass that withers and flowers that fall (Isaiah 40:6-8) and like a “mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). It is not an earthly life God wants us to desire and cherish, but eternal life with him. It is not freedom from oppression God promises, but freedom from sin and the requirements of the law. It is not equality among men God offers, but equality among fellow Christians.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

The True Promise

“All people on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). This promise from God to Abraham is his promise to us as well, and to all who become children of the promise through faith in Jesus Christ. We who hold the keys of God's kingdom in our hands should be more concerned with the Great Commission than with the Ten Commandments. We should be actively shining the light of God's love in the world through service to others instead of demanding that others change their lives for our comfort. We should be inviting the lost to put their lives under God's control instead of reinforcing a false belief that we are a privileged nation “under God.” We need to throw away the crutches of moral laws and religious ceremonies that do not justify us in God's sight and stand on faith alone. We need to show the world that true religion needs neither the support nor the approval of the governments of men in order to survive and thrive. We need to build a firm wall of separation between our flawed, human government and our divine calling of worship to God.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. (Matthew 22:21)

For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. (Hebrews 13:14)