

Gentiles Are Called

“Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.”

—Acts 15:14

FOR CENTURIES, THE NA-

bion of Israel had received exclusive favor from God as recorded by Moses, when he wrote, “Thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special

people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.” (Deut. 7:6) This is substantiated by the Prophet Amos, who also said, “Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”—Amos. 3:1,2

In the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, he wrote concerning Israel’s special position of Divine favor. “What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were

committed the oracles of God.” (Rom. 3:1,2) ‘Oracles’ are Divine utterances from the Heavenly Father, and suggest a very high level of favor. When Stephen stood and spoke before his accusers he used the same word oracles in his defense. He referred to Moses and made it clear that he had received the oracles from God’s angel. “This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt, Saying unto Aaron, make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.”—Acts 7:37-40

EXCLUSIVE FAVOR ENDS

This special period of favor lasted until the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit by Gentiles as recorded in Acts, chapter 10.

From the account, we read in part, “While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit.”—Acts 10:44,45

The nation of Israel was then cast off from favor, as proclaimed by Jesus. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,

thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”—Matt. 23:37-39

When we look back at those days of the Early Church, we note that the heavenly call went out exclusively to the nation of Israel. As the Heavenly Father’s special people, we also observe his faithfulness in keeping his Word to the chosen ones of Israel. However, that exclusive favor brought penalties for unfaithfulness and disobedience. Thus Jesus proclaimed, “Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”—chap. 21:43

THE KEY SCRIPTURE

The words of our featured scripture (Acts 15:14) were spoken by James in response to a problem that had arisen in the Early Church in which certain men were teaching that without circumcision after the manner of Moses, they could not be saved. (Acts 15:1) A dispute had arisen in the ecclesia and, because of the seriousness of the issue, Paul and Barnabas travelled to Jerusalem while declaring the conversion of Cornelius and the Gentiles along the way. They arrived there to discuss their concerns with the apostles and elders of the Early Church.—vss. 2-6

THE DISPUTE

After being warmly greeted at Jerusalem, they met to consider the matter of Gentile conversion.

“When there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.”—vss. 7-11

The two prominent guests arose and, “Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me.” (vss. 12,13) He then spoke the words recorded in our featured scripture, and added, “To this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written [Amos 9:11], After this I will return, and build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.”—vss. 15-17

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The nation of Israel has a very long and colorful history. They had endured God’s chastisement long

before their house was left desolate as a result of their not having accepted our Lord Jesus as their promised Messiah. Neither had the heavenly call yet been heard. One of the more severe punishments the Israelites suffered was their seventy years of captivity in Babylon centuries before Jesus had been born. Daniel was one of those who had been taken captive at that time, and in his and other prophecies there are important factors leading up to Jesus' First Advent.

DANIEL'S PRAYER ANSWERED

When Daniel realized that the determined time of Israel's captivity was nearing its end, he went to the Heavenly Father in prayer to seek his will in connection with the return and favor to the people of Israel.

God answered his prayer through the angel Gabriel, as recorded by Daniel. He wrote, "Yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation. And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding." (Dan. 9:21,22) The angel then proclaimed, "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city."—vs. 24

Daniel's contemporary, the Prophet Ezekiel, was also given information by God that revealed important aspects of his will for the Israelite nation, and which provided the key to understanding the time features. Under the guiding hand of God, the prophet wrote, "I have appointed thee each day for

a year.” (Ezek. 4:6) Thus Daniel understood that the seventy weeks that were determined upon Israel were not intended to be four hundred and ninety days, but rather four hundred and ninety years. This was a very important point in connection with the Heavenly Father’s ultimate plans and purposes.

UNDERSTANDING REVEALED

Daniel then understood that his people would soon be delivered from their long period of captivity under Babylonian rule, and that the nation of Israel would once again be restored to exclusive Divine favor. True to Gabriel’s prophetic announcement that a commandment would go forth to restore and rebuild Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25), Babylon was soon conquered by the power of the Medo-Persian empire. Cyrus, the king of Persia, then made a decree to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, therefore ending their captivity by Babylon.

The particulars in connection with these exciting events concerning the children of Israel are recorded by Ezra, who wrote, “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah [Jer. 25:12-14; 29:1-10] might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.”—Ezra 1:1,2

THE PROMISED MESSIAH

When God’s angel Gabriel visited Daniel, he also gave him detailed information that led up to the

coming of Messiah the Prince, the purpose of his becoming a perfect man, and coming to earth as a ransom sacrifice for the sins of the sin-sick human family. (Dan. 9:24,25) One of the first things Jesus did was to ask John the Baptist to baptize him at the Jordan River which officially began his earthly ministry. The angel's words also revealed that Messiah would be "cut off, but not for himself" (vs. 26), and that this would occur "in the midst of the week." (vs. 27) It was exactly three and a half years after Jesus began his ministry that he was put to death in the foretold middle of the week of seven years, thus fulfilling the angel's proclamation from God.

RETURNING FAVOR

The returned favor to Israel was again exclusive, but during Jesus' ministry there were certain Gentiles who also sought blessings from our Lord. It is recorded that on one occasion he met a woman who asked for his favor. We read, "Behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us." (Matt. 15:22,23) Although she had been ignored by our Lord the woman was very persistent.

The account continues, "He answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it

to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."—vss. 24-28

The Canaanite woman was one of several Gentiles who received blessings from Jesus from time to time, but they were few in number when compared to the great majority of natural Israel who received the benefits of our Lord's teaching and healing on a regular basis.

I HAVE CHOSEN YOU

This exclusive favor to Israel was shown in different ways. For example, the twelve apostles were chosen from Israel, and they became the foundation members of the Early Church. Judas, however, failed in his calling and had to be replaced. The apostles decided to make a selection of their own, but they had overlooked the fact that it was not their position to select the apostles. This appointment could only be made by the Heavenly Father and his Son Jesus. "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you." (John 15:16) Later, Saul of Tarsus, who was also a Jew, was called by the Heavenly Father to replace Judas.

At first, all witness activity was centered in Jerusalem. The eleven apostles as well as other disciples continued to reside there as Jesus had instructed them to do. "Being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.

For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence.”—Acts 1:4,5

EXTENDING THE HEAVENLY CALL

After the Holy Spirit of God had come upon this small group of specially called believers, many new converts began to join with the apostles in Jerusalem. The call to become members of the body of Christ required a certain amount of organized effort. Therefore, key people were motivated by the Holy Spirit to travel to other geographic locations so that the work could be extended in those areas. It was no doubt in this way that the Heavenly Father touched the heart of a certain Levite who lived on the island of Cyprus. In the scriptural account, we read, “Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” (chap. 4:36,37) No doubt this was God’s way of bringing Joses to Jerusalem where he could also share in sending forth the message of Truth concerning the heavenly call.

There were still many Israelites in the Holy City who had come to Judah from other places to celebrate the Passover. Some of these stayed there, and became disciples of our Lord. Among these were certain Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jews. Later on, some of the widows of this group began to complain that they were being neglected in their share of community supplies. When word of this situation reached the apostles, they sought to correct

the problem by having deacons appointed to oversee this particular service.

STEPHEN CALLED

One of those deacons was Stephen, who is believed to have been a Hellenist. Because of his humble service, God granted him new opportunities for the service of the Truth where he could exercise his talents in a more public manner. His preaching of Jesus as the promised Messiah, however, caused major confrontation with some of the other Greek-speaking Jews who were not believers. The scriptural account of his ministry, trial and sentence to death by stoning is recorded in Acts, chapters 6 and 7.

From that account we read in part, “Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.”—Acts 6:8-10

How true were the words of the Master who had foretold, “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist. And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolk, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish.”—Luke 21:15-18

Concerning the young brother Stephen’s fate, we further read, “Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words

against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”—Acts 6:11-15

Worldly-minded men procured witnesses and bribed them to make false charges against Stephen. The official representatives of the Sanhedrin—the elders and scribes—misrepresented his words and placed him on trial to face the charge of blasphemy. But his face shone as with an angelic beauty before the council.

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH

After speaking eloquently before his accusers, Stephen then said to them, “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: 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.”—chap. 7:51-53

Thus the ‘stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears’ to whom Stephen spoke became full of rage and immediately demanded his life. They killed him by stoning him to death, and the

young convert who had readily accepted the Heavenly Father's call died for his faith. Stephen's death had a severe impact upon the Master's disciples in Jerusalem. This profound evidence of increasing persecution caused many to move away and settle in distant places. Some left for former homelands, and others who were natives of Judea decided to go with them.

SCATTERED ABROAD TO PREACH THE CALL

The heavenly call for a New Creation in Christ Jesus had taken another tragic step forward with the martyrdom of Stephen. The wonderful call was to continue to go out throughout this present Gospel Age even to our own day, and in many distant places.

“Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.”—chap. 8:1-4 ■

“If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.”

—I Peter 4:14