

## Coming Soon God's Stop Watch is Israel

When Frederick the Great asked his chaplain to give him in a sentence the strongest evidence for Christianity, the chaplain replied, "*The Jew, Sir.*"

Have you ever heard of a *Hittite* bagel? How about a *Canaanite* bagel?

An *Amorite* bagel? Though it's been Americanized, you may not realize that the bagel, like most foods, has ethnic origins. The bagel didn't just show up out of nowhere. It was brought to America from Europe by Polish Jews and was originally known as the **Jewish** bagel. It's now experienced its own assimilation process that's seen it go from an obscure ethnic bakery staple to just another ubiquitous item found in most grocery stores, bakeries and even convenience stores. The bagel has been so Americanized that few people any longer associate it with its Jewish heritage.

Yet, it was known as a *Jewish* bagel, not a Hittite or Canaanite or even an Amorite bagel. Those are just three of the many ancient enemies of ancient Jews. They're mentioned as adversaries of Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 15:19-20. While the Hittites, Canaanites and Amorites disappeared from the earth thousands of years ago, today there are 13.3 million Jews in the world. That's after 6 million were exterminated during the Holocaust. The strongest evidence for Christianity is "*The Jew, Sir.*"

We don't know where or how far we are in God's end time program. We do know that God's timepiece isn't Timex, Rolex, or even Bulova. **God's stopwatch is Israel.** That's Paul's argument in Romans 11. We're going to pick it up in verse 25-32 (p. 947).

How is it that a small sliver of land in the Middle East called Israel could become a geopolitical focus of the whole world? How else do we explain the continued existence of the Jewish people despite millennia of hatred, opposition, persecution, and more recently, Hitler's desperate attempt to cleanse Europe of the "Jewish scum." The Jews are a "miracle people," a tiny ethnic remnant in a world of 6.4 billion people.

That the Jews exist at all can't be explained by anything other than the sovereign hand of God. And Jews exist not only in Israel but in nearly every nation on earth. Some people find it appalling that the Jewish people have an importance that far exceeds their numbers, yet I believe it's part of the blessing of God on His chosen people. Winston Churchill put it very succinctly, "*Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are, beyond any question, the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has appeared in the world.*"

New nations are born today with such frequency that we've come to accept that as commonplace. We're used to having a war going on somewhere in the world. But the rebirth of the nation of Israel and its ongoing conflicts and wars are of great prophetic significance. That's because....

**1. Israel's future is directly tied to God's end time plan.** Though the slaughter of Jews during World War II was devastating, the promises of Israel's rebirth permeate God's Word. Close to 100% of end times prophecy concerns Israel and biblical signs of the end pertain particularly to Israel.

In what is known as the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, 25; Mark 13; Luke 21), the Lord Jesus answers His disciples' question, "*What will be the sign of Your coming and of the*

*end of the age?"* He details out phenomena that are global in scope but of particular concern to those in the Holy Land. Jesus speaks to His disciples as Israelites in particular when He observes, *"But the one who endures to the end will be saved"* (vs. 13). It's the Jewish people gathered in Israel at the time of Armageddon who must endure *"to the end"*—that is the Second Coming of the Lord—to be saved.

The promises of Israel's return to the Land are very specific: *"In that day the Lord will extend His hand yet a **second time** to recover the remnant that remains of His people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth"* (Isaiah 11:11-12). Notice that phrase *"a second time."* The 1st captivity was the Babylonian captivity and lasted 70 years. From it, some Jews returned to Palestine to restore Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple, but under the Roman rule, the Jews were dispersed again (70 A.D.) to all corners of the earth. The return from this dispersion is the *"second time"* Isaiah is speaking of. This return will bring Jews from all parts of the world, not simply from Babylon, like the first return.

Add to that, the prediction of this return includes repossession of the Promised Land: *"For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers"* (Jer. 16:15). *"They shall possess the land forever"* (Isa. 60:21). *"I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land"* (Ezek. 36:24).

This return will be the final one. The prophets also prophesied that when the people return on this occasion there will be no further dispersion of Israel: *"I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall **never** again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them," says the Lord your God"* (Amos 9:14-15).

It's important to notice, particularly in light of the dull spiritual condition of most Jews today, that their final return will ultimately be accompanied by spiritual cleansing and regeneration. This promise is carefully interwoven with the promises of their return. *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God"* (Ezek. 36:26-28).

There will not only be a return, which happened in 1948, there will ultimately be a coming revival and national repentance. That's still future and will happen in the last days. Zechariah prophesies of it, *"I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me **whom they have pierced**; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity"* (12:10; 13:1). Old Testament prophets remind us over and over again that **Israel's future is directly tied to God's end time plan.**

**2. The Jews are still God's chosen people.** Wonderfully, failure is not final with God. We don't see all that God is doing. Grace is a gift not a reward and there are consequences to rejecting Christ. The nation of Israel for the most part has rejected Christ but this failure is not final.

In Romans 11:1, Paul asks and answers, *"I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham."* For the most part, the Jews have not put their faith in Jesus. Paul speaks to that and wonders if they've fallen so far that there's no longer any hope for them. We don't have time to work through the entire passage today, Over and over again in this section Paul gives this very strong answer: *"Not at all!"* Israel has not lost their privileged position before God forever. The promises of national blessing are still valid. God's rejection is not permanent.

This is just a sidebar but I'd like to make an important point. Our understanding of God's plan for Israel affects our eschatology, which is the doctrine of what will happen in the end times. We believe God will yet fulfill His promises to Israel and that belief radically affects our theology. Because if God is through with Israel than what happens to all the promises? How can we trust God's faithfulness unless we believe He will keep His word? God isn't finished with Israel. Hold on to hope for the Jewish people. God isn't done with the Jew, or with you or me. Romans 11:23-24: *"And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree."* God isn't finished yet.

I love Romans 11:29! What a wonderful and encouraging promise, *"For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."* God's promises can't be broken, not even by human unbelief.

No one can deny that modern Israel is a secular Jewish state. It's not just that most Jews don't believe in Jesus, it's that most don't practice their own faith to any great extent. Jewishness, in most cases, refers to family heritage, not to adherence to the Torah. Obviously this is not true of Orthodox Jews, yet even in Israel they're a distinct minority. The proper way to say it is that the Jewish people are still God's chosen people, but they as a people have been partially blinded, because their leaders rejected Jesus, in the present age. This leads to a paradox that we need not try to resolve. The Jews are still God's chosen people, and are partially blinded and under God's judgment in the present age, but there's hope.

I love G. F. Watt's famous painting, *Hope*. **(Picture of painting)** It's the picture of a poor woman against the world. Her eyes are bandaged so she can't see but in her hand is a harp. All of the strings are broken except one. Those broken strings represent her shattered expectations, her bitter disappointments. That last string though is the string of hope! She strikes it and a glorious melody rings forth.

My friend, there's hope for Israel and there's hope for us. In the midst of shattered dreams and bitter disappointments we still have the Lord Jesus Christ – our string of hope. It strikes me that whatever you're struggling with today, it's important to hold onto hope. With the state of our nation, hold onto hope. With the economy, hold onto hope. With your family situation, hold onto hope. With that fractured friendship, hold onto

hope. With that person far from Christ, hold onto hope. With that Jewish person you know who doesn't yet believe in Jesus, hold onto hope.

**3. God has a future for Israel.** J. I. Packer, in his bestselling book, *Knowing God*, condemns the contemporary trend toward what he dubs "Santa Claus Theology." This theology lays great emphasis on the goodness and love of God, yet refuses to come to grips with God's holiness, severity, and judgment. Commonly stated, "Santa Claus Theology" goes something like this: "I believe in a God of love and not in a God of hate and anger. The kind of God I worship would never send anyone to spend eternity in hell." But the Achilles' heel of "Santa Claus Theology" is the fact of suffering and evil.

If God is a God of love, a God who only bestows good and pleasant gifts, then what's the source of all the evil, tragedy and suffering in this world? If God is all good, then He must not be all powerful or evil could not exist. The God that Paul served and of Whom he wrote of is described in Romans 11 as a God characterized both by His goodness and His severity. "*Note then the kindness and the severity of God*"(11:22a).

At the present time, God is displaying His kindness to the Gentiles, while He concentrates His severity upon the Jews. The underlying question of Romans 9-11 is, "Why?" Why are the vast majority of the Jews failing to experience God's promised blessings while many Gentiles are coming to faith in Israel's Messiah and abounding in His kindness? Because Israel rejected God. They refused the salvation offered by Jesus and His apostles. So God has temporarily hardened the Jews so that salvation may come to the Gentiles. But in God's good time, Israel will be restored to a place of national prominence and blessing. That's the promise of Romans 11.

Modern Israel is a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Remember that the prophets foresaw a day when Israel would dwell safely in the Land, free from terror at the hands of its neighbors, protected by Yahweh, and trusting in Him completely for salvation. The prophets never envisioned a regathering that would primarily or ultimately be in unbelief. They looked ahead to a golden age when the lion would lie down with the lamb and "*all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*" (Is. 11:9). In that day all of Israel will come into Jerusalem "*to the house of the God of Jacob*" because the Lord Himself will be there to judge between the nations and to settle disputes between many peoples. "*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore*" (Is. 2:4).

But if you checked CNN this morning, you didn't see anyone beating their swords into plowshares. You may have seen Israel defending her borders or Hezbollah firing rockets Israel. There are scenes of war and devastation, of civilians on both sides dying in the conflict. The leader of Iran has declared that the ultimate goal is to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. The Israelis are determined to destroy the power of Hezbollah. Meanwhile the Syrians threaten to attack in force if they're attacked. While the UN attempts to cobble together a resolution for the whole mess. That's not the fulfillment of Isaiah 2. It's not the glorious day of peace the prophets saw in the distance.

Both Ezekiel 37 and Romans 11 look forward to a day when the Jewish people as a nation will come to life because God Himself will breathe on them that they may live. Ezekiel 37 pictures a valley of dry bones brought to life by the power of God. Those

bones represent the “*whole house of Israel*” (v. 11). They’re the dry bones of the Jewish people scattered among the nations. When God begins the process of bringing the nation back to life, He first assembles the bones, then attaches tendons and covers the bodies with skin. But according to verse 8, “*there was no breath in them,*” that is, there were bodies put together by God but not yet given life.

That’s a good symbol of modern Israel. The dead bones have come together in the ancient Jewish homeland. There’s a body with flesh on it, but there’s no spiritual life. Ezekiel 37 and Romans 11 anticipate a day when Israel will come to life as a nation because God Himself will breathe on them that they may live. Jeremiah 31:31-34 pictures the same thing as it describes the impact of the New Covenant. God promises to give Israel four new things: a new heart, a new relationship, a new knowledge and new forgiveness.

Then, God seals the promise by referring to the constancy of the sun, moon and the stars, which operate by God’s decree. “*Only if these decrees vanish from my sight, declares the Lord, will the nation of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me*” (v. 36). So here’s a good test. Did the sun come up this morning? Then, Israel will not cease. Did the stars shine last night? Then, Israel will not cease. Not even Israel’s continued unbelief can cancel God’s promises to His ancient people (v. 37). And their unbelief will not last forever. Paul makes the same point in Romans 11.

God’s plan for history always moves forward in relation to what He’s doing with His chosen people. The fact that Israel has been and continues to be reconstituted as a nation is prophetically significant. It’s so significant that it makes Israel God’s “super-sign” of the end times. Were Israel not a nation again, it would be impossible for events of the end times to occur because so many of them take place in that tiny country or in reference to it.

**4. The story of the Bible begins and ends in the Middle East.** World history is going to climax, not in Chicago or New York, not in Rome or Beijing, not in Moscow or even Rio de Janeiro, but in the city of Jerusalem and in the nation of Israel.

Recently, Newt Gingrich said that he believes that we’re living in the early days of World War III. He pointed out the dangerous situation in North Korea, Iran, the current crisis in Israel and Lebanon, train bombings in Madrid, subway bombings in London, the events of 9/11, and the recent foiled attempts to blow up the subway system in New York and the Sears Tower in Chicago. We could also add the attempt by terrorists to blow up ten airplanes flying from England to the United States. Unlike World War II, where massive armies squared off in battles for territory in Europe, North Africa, and the islands of the Pacific, we now face loosely-organized terror cells, connected by the Internet and thus based in many countries.

Does anyone doubt that the radical Islamists want nothing less than the eradication of Israel? Does anyone doubt that they want to see the U.S. utterly defeated? One Islamic leader warned of a “*clash of civilizations*” if the current conflict is not quickly ended. I think we can see a pattern of events that started with the Gulf War in 1991, continued with the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the attack on 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. All those events are tied directly to the current conflict between Israel and Iran. The rise of militant Islamic terrorism has made the world significantly more dangerous and unstable.

No one knows when Christ will return, but I hope and pray that it's soon. It certainly seems that many of the pieces are in place, that the table is set, and we're not far from the moment when the curtain will rise on the final act of human history. In Matthew 24:33-34 Jesus used the budding of the fig tree as a symbol of how events will unfold in the last days before his return: *"So also, when you see all these things, you know that He is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place."*

How much clearer can it be? If you look at a tree and see the leaves sprouting, you know that summer is not far away. It may not come for several weeks, but once you see the leaves, you know summer is coming. In the same way, there will be slowly-unfolding signs of the return of Jesus Christ. As those things begin to happen, we know that the return of the Lord can't be far away and Jesus expects His followers to watch and be ready for His return. As we talked about last week, the next event on God's prophetic calendar is the Rapture.

## **5. Israel's story should be a great encouragement. Why?**

**a. *It beautifully demonstrates God's grace.*** To this very day, the issue of who controls the Promised Land is the most volatile in international politics. But we need not worry; the right to the Promised Land has already been determined by the only One who has the authority to determine it. The Land is called holy because it belongs to God. The Bible tells us that the earth is the Lord's to do with as He wills. In His covenant with Abraham, God designated who would control this land: He gave it to Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel.

We read of God's choice of the Jews in Deuteronomy 7:6, where He declared the people of Israel holy, chosen to be *"a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."*

I remember reading an offbeat little rhyme about Israel by British journalist, William Norman Ewer: *"How odd of God to choose the Jews."* When you think about it, this poetic quip expresses a valid observation. Doesn't it seem a little odd that of all the people on earth, God selected these particular people to be His chosen nation? Why would God choose the Jews?

The Bible tells us that God's choice of Israel had nothing to do with merit. It wasn't because she was more numerous than other people in the world; she was the least (Deut. 7:7). It wasn't because Israel was more sensitive to God than other nations. Although God called her by name, Israel did not know Him (Isa. 45:4). It wasn't because Israel was more righteous than other nations. When God later confirmed His promise of land to the Jews, He reminded them that they were a rebellious, stiff-necked people (Deut. 9:6-7). If God chose to bless the nation of Israel not because she was more populous or spiritually responsive or righteous than other nations, just why did He choose the Jews?

The answer: because of His grace. It was His sovereign purpose to do so and it was all of grace. God cares what happens to His people and their land. God has chosen to love Israel.

**b. *It powerfully demonstrates that God always keeps His promises.*** Adoniram Judson, the first American missionary spent his life taking the gospel to Burma, once

said in the midst of his many trials, *“The future is as bright as the promises of God”* He didn't live to see much visible fruit for his years of hardship. But today, out of a population of 53 million people, Burma or Myanmar has well over 2 million Christians. Judson, who believed in God's sovereign grace, knew that His promises could not fail.

My friend, no matter what your trials, if you have received God's grace in Christ, you have a bright future because His promises cannot fail.

At first glance, a chapter like Romans 11 that deals with the subject of whether God still has a purpose for the Jews might seem irrelevant to your life. I mean, what does the future of Israel have to do with finding a marriage partner or staying happy with the one you've got? What does Israel's future have to do with the pressures of work and paying bills? How can it help you as you struggle to rear your children in this evil world? What relevance does this topic have as you struggle with personal problems or health problems?

Romans 11 answers the question: *“Can God's promises fail?”* God chose the nation of Israel as His people apart from all other nations on earth (Deut. 7:6). Through the prophet Jeremiah, God assured the sinful nation that was about to go into captivity that His promises to Israel could never fail (Jer. 31:35-36; 33:19-26). To dispel the thought that Israel's sin could lead to their permanent rejection, God added (Jer. 31:37), *“Thus says the Lord, ‘If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done,’ declares the Lord.”* In other words, if God rejects Israel as His people, then His promises can fail. And if His promises to Israel fail, then how can we know that His promises to us will not also fail?

Remember, too, those promises include working all of our trials together for good (Romans 8:28) and His promise that no trial can ever cut us off from His love (8:35-39). Yet, the fact that Israel has returned to the Land is a powerful example that God's promises are real and we can trust Him. Romans 11 shows us that God is in charge and that His promises and His purpose will never fail.

**Conclusion:** So are we living in the last days? No one knows for sure. But consider these facts. There's a clear pattern of events laid out in the Bible concerning the last days. If you put together the various strands of prophetic teaching from the Old and New Testaments, you discover a fairly detailed picture of the end time landscape—morally, politically, spiritually, militarily and economically. There's also an amazing similarity between our world and the world that the Bible describes at the end of time. If you doubt that, take your Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. See how well they fit together. And most of all, keep your eye on the nation of Israel. **God's stopwatch is Israel.** If all of this is true, we may indeed be the generation privileged to see the coming of Jesus Christ. It might not be long now.

Suppose you attend a play in a great theater. Before the play begins, there's noise, bustle, confusion, movement behind the curtains, the sound of instruments warming up. Ushers seat latecomers, friends greet each other, find their seats and study the program. Then the lights flicker on and off. The time is at hand. How much longer? No one can say exactly. Before long, the house lights go down, a hush falls, the conductor lifts his baton, the overture begins and the curtains slowly rise.

Where are we in this sequence? The curtain is still down, the music hasn't started, people are still coming in. But I left out one thing. Just before the house lights go down, the noise of the crowd rises to a roar as everyone talks at once. They know the play is about to begin.

That, I believe, is where we are. Almost everyone is seated now. The appointed hour is almost here. The noise you hear is the cacophony of voices in the world just before the house lights go down.

Will we live to see the end of all things? Are we the terminal generation? Is it possible that we'll soon hear the shout, the trumpet and the voice of the archangel? It's very possible. The stage appears to be set for the final act of human history. And if that's true, what sort of people should we be? What difference should it make if we believe that we are living in the last days?

***We ought to live with zeal and enthusiasm.*** The message of the coming of Christ ought to fill us with tremendous excitement. These are great days to be alive. We ought to say to each other: "Go for it." This is no time to put off living for God. It's rather a day to be fully committed, fully engaged, fully involved, and aggressively serving the Lord. This is no time to play it safe.

***We ought to take an inventory of the way we've been living.*** Often people say, "If I knew Jesus were coming tomorrow, I'd \_\_\_\_\_," and then they list the changes they'd make. But one day it will be true. Therefore, we ought to live that way today.

***We ought to face the future with optimism.*** The world looks at all the problems and says, "Is there any hope?" For those who know Jesus Christ, there's enormous hope. If He comes today, we win. If He comes in fifty years, we win. If He comes in a thousand years, we win.

These are great days to be alive, the greatest days in all human history. Think of it...we may well be the generation privileged to meet Jesus in the clouds at the Rapture. And if that's true, there's never been a better time to be a Christian. If that's true, there's never been a better time to tell someone else. If that's true, there's never been a better time to raise a Christian family. One final word: If it is true that we are the terminal generation, then we will see increasingly scary things in the days ahead.

The bottom line is quite simple: If Jesus comes today, will you be ready? If He comes tomorrow, will you be ready? If He comes in your lifetime, will you be ready? If this really is the terminal generation, the smartest thing you can do is to give your life 100% to Jesus Christ. So that if He comes today or tomorrow or next week or next year or in a hundred years, you'll have no regrets but will be ready to see Him when He returns.