

THE TIMES OF THE GENTILES

Presumably because of what I said in August's article, about Abraham having received all the promises made to him, I have been asked by our good brother John Wood, Dunfermline, to deal with Luke 21:24 and Romans 11:25. I am very grateful for this request not only because these verses are difficult and worth another look. Those holding pre-millennialist views regard these verses as supportive of a future resurgence of Jewish religious life in Jerusalem, return of all Jews to Palestine and a reinstatement of Israel to its former glories as God's chosen.

Luke 21:24 says, **"And they (Israel) shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations, and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled ..."** These words of Jesus refer to the sacking of Jerusalem in AD70 by the Romans. Romans 11:25 says, **"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits, that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in."**

I'm sure that brother Wood wants us to notice that Jerusalem would be trodden down of the Gentiles **"UNTIL the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled"**, and that blindness (in part) is happened to Israel **"UNTIL the fulness of the Gentiles be come in"**. The presumption is, no doubt, that things are going to change AFTER **"the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled."**

Before considering precisely what changes are likely AFTER **"the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled,"** we should establish exactly what is meant by the phrase itself. The RSV renders it, **"Until the full number of the Gentiles come in"** (to the church).

Moses Lard says, "Until the full sum of the Gentiles come in: that is, in to the Church. 'Full sum' – the words denote that portion or large number of Gentiles that are to enter the church before the conversion of the Jews takes place."

Macknight says, "I (Paul) must show you this secret, that blindness of the Jews, in part, will continue only till the generality of the Gentiles come into the Christian church."

Barnes says, "It means until the abundance, or the great multitude, of the Gentiles shall be converted ... Probably the meaning is that this blindness of the Jews is to continue until great numbers of the Gentiles shall be converted and until the gospel is extensively spread: then the conversion of the Jews will be a part of the rapid spread of the gospel."

E.M. Zerr says, "Fulness of the Gentiles means until they have had a full time with the gospel, all to themselves while the Jews are out. Just when that fact will be accomplished the apostle does not say."

William Barclay in his translation on the N.T. says, **"until the time allotted to the**

Gentiles runs its course."

From these random examples we can see that there seems a general consensus among some Bible commentators that the phrase **"until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled"** refers to a certain length of time during which the Gentiles would take advantage of the blessings brought by Christ, whereas the Jews during that time would spurn the gospel. However, a time, yet future, seems to be envisaged by these same Bible commentators, from Rom. 11:25, when the blindness upon the Jews will lift and **"all Israel will be saved."** When this process will begin and **how long** it will take no one seems prepared to guess. After all, for well nigh 2,000 years the Jews have shown no particular interest in Christ or the gospel and so we must still be in **"the times of the Gentiles"** and, who knows, may yet be for another few thousand years. And how many thousand years will the conversion of **"all Israel"** take thereafter? Those who believe that the **"end of the world is near"** better think again. Needless to say there are many Bible students who do not agree with the above interpretation of Paul's words.

If **"all Israel"** is to be saved, the vast millions of Jews who have already lived and died during the last 2,000 years in rejection of Christ, will surely knock a great hole in the term **"all Israel"**.

The Context of Paul's Words

To understand the drift of Paul's statement (Rom. 11:25) we require, as always, to notice the context of his words. Ideally we should read Chaps. 8,9,10 and 11 of Romans, where Paul draws on all manner of arguments to contrast the limitations and failings of the Mosaic Law with the virtues of Christ, His gospel and His church; and where Paul proves to the Jews that even the O.T. predicted the time when God would accept the Gentiles on equal terms with Jews Paul, at this time, reflects gloomily upon the spiritual state of his own people, Israel, and laments that Christ, as predicted, had proved a stumbling stone to them, and that because **"of their unbelief"** they, generally, had declined to enter the Kingdom of God. However, he quotes Isaiah as saying that **"Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, A REMNANT shall be saved."** Indeed Paul insisted that his own **"heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved"**. (Presumably if **"all Israel"** was going to be saved, Paul need not have worried himself in this way.) **"For I bear them record that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God."** (Rom. 10:1). Paul continues through Chap. 10 to illustrate the shortcomings of Israel regarding God's Messiah (regularly quoting Moses and Isaiah) and shows that when Isaiah said, **"Who hath believed our report?"** he was, in fact referring to Israel's refusal to accept the gospel of Christ. Moses, himself, predicted that God would provoke the Jews to jealousy by promoting the Gentiles: **"by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you."** (10:19).

In Chap. 11 Paul begins by postulating a question which may have entered the minds of the recipients of his epistle: i.e. Has God then, in effect, **"Cast away His people, Israel?"** He quickly answers it, **"God forbid. For I also am an Israelite"**. In short, if Paul (an Israelite) could be saved by the gospel, so could the rest of the Israelite nation: in exactly the same way. By elevating the Gentiles to a position on level terms with the Jews God had not **cast away** the Jews: they, with the Gentiles, had equal opportunity to embrace the gospel and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In the event, the Gentiles had quickly grasped the opportunity, whereas the bulk of the Israelite nation had treated the blessings of Christ with disdain. Paul, elsewhere in this epistle, reminds everyone that **"the gospel of Christ"** is God's only power unto salvation, **to the Jew first** and also to the Gentile, and that the Kingdom of Heaven had been preached by the twelve, and the seventy, exclusively to the **"lost sheep of**

the House of Israel". Likewise, when the gospel of Christ was preached, subsequent to Pentecost, it was preached firstly to Jews. Although Paul was to be "a light to the Gentiles" he laboured initially with Jews and when travelling the first place he made for was the Synagogue. In fact, until Philip preached to the Samaritans and Peter preached to Gentiles (Cornelius), the church consisted solely of many thousands of Jews. And so the Jews had every opportunity to receive the gospel and enter the church, especially bearing in mind that the gospel was **to the Jew first**, and also to the Greek. Paul eventually became disenchanted with the Jewish reaction to the gospel, and when the Jews at Antioch "**spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. Paul and Barnabus waxed bold, and said, IT WAS NECESSARY that the word of God should FIRST have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles.**" (Acts 13:46) To support his contention that "a remnant" of Israel would, in fact, be saved (and this is a far cry from "all Israel" being saved) Paul quotes the occasion when Elijah, in hiding, complained to God that the children of Israel, after throwing down God's altars, forsaking God's covenant and slaying God's prophets with the sword (so that Elijah was the only one left): were now intent upon finding Elijah to put him to death. "**But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved unto Myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. Even so then AT THIS PRESENT TIME ALSO there is a remnant according to the election of grace.**" (11.5). And so, it seems, that the saved "remnant" was in process in Paul's day and not something reserved for "the Millennium".

The latter part of Chap. 11 strikes a note of caution directed towards the Gentiles. Although Israel, by and large, had fallen by the wayside, and the Gentiles had proved to be ready beneficiaries of the gospel, God would use the situation by trying to provoke the Jews to jealousy (11:11). Under the O.T. economy Israel had had the pre-eminence and the Gentiles "**had been strangers from the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.**" But now, in the gospel age, the roles seemed reversed, in that the Gentiles were now pre-eminently followers of God's Son, whereas the Jews had not only spurned Him but crucified Him. Paul hoped that even he, personally, might "**by any means, provoke to emulation them which are my flesh (Israelites), and might save some of them**". Paul hoped, by the preaching of Christ, to save some of his countrymen and states that "**if they abide not still in unbelief**" they can be reconciled again to God. That was a big "IF" and 2,000 years have passed without any appreciable change in the attitude of Jewish indifference. That was how things stood in Paul's day, but what did Paul say of the future? This brings us to the verses mentioned by Brother Wood, where Paul, cautions the Gentiles not to be smug or complacent in their favoured position, because the roles could easily be reversed again and the Jews, "**if they abide not still in unbelief**", could be restored again to God's favour. "**For,**" says Paul, (the verse at issue) "**I would not brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits: that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved ...**"

Conclusion

And so, where does all this take us? At the end of the day we must all make up our own minds as to what is meant by "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in", and David Lipscomb in his Commentary agrees "it is a difficult question and so receives different answers from different people".

Space is dwindling but certain points should be noted:—

(1.) We are not told **how long** "the times of the Gentiles" would last, whether 100 years: 1,000 years or even until Christ returns. As remarked earlier, 2,000 years have already passed wherein the Jews have shown little interest in the gospel. We should

also note that the word "Until" does not always signify some activity thereafter. For instance Michal had no children UNTIL her dying day (2 Sam. 6:23): she certainly had very few children after her dying day. "UNTIL the time of reformation" (Heb. 10:9) does not suggest earthly activity thereafter nor does "UNTIL the times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:21). Thus "UNTIL the times of the Gentiles" might not signify activity thereafter.

(2.) "And so all Israel shall be saved" does not mean that every Jew will be saved any more than every Gentile will be. Paul says he agonised that "he might save some of them". Why agonise to save "some" if "all" are going to be saved. The phrase "And so" all Israel will be saved, means "in this way". "All Israel" will be saved, in this way if they are going to be saved at all. In what way? the rest of the verse tells us: by faith and acceptance of the "Deliverer": Jesus Christ. That was how "all Israel" would be saved. It also depends upon what Paul means by 'Israel' for, earlier, he says, "For they are not all Israel, that are of Israel, neither because they are Abraham's seed, are they children." (Rom. 9:6), and "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly" (Rom. 2:28), and "they that are of faith (in Christ) the same are the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). In any case, Jesus, Himself, said the broad road to destruction contains the masses, and few would find the K. of G. FEW (not "all") will be saved.

(3.) There is nothing to be gained by Jews returning to Palestine. Jews must become Christians (and lose Jewish identity) and they can be Christians equally well in any part of the world. Paul, on his travels, made hundreds of Jewish converts, but did not seem to advise them all to "head for Palestine": in fact, they established churches in their own locality.

(4.) If, after "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in" there is a period of time when Jews are converted in great numbers: this, as stated previously, will surely be cause for great rejoicing but they will receive no special dispensation, and will have to embrace the gospel like anyone else. This possibility does not, however, bolster any idea of a "millennium" or "1,000 years reign." The Jews will require to undergo their dramatic conversions prior to the coming of Christ, for, on that day, all opportunities of obeying the gospel will cease. We are presently living 'in the last days' or 'last times' (Acts 2:17) and there will obviously be 'a last day' (John 6:39) when momentous events will occur. Christ will return on that day, "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first." (1Thess. 4:16). The General Resurrection will also take place that day (John 6:44). That day will also be Judgment Day (Matt. 25:31). This will not happen over a period of time but "in the twinkling of an eye". The then living will join the resurrected dead to meet the Lord in the air and all shall be changed. The earth will be destroyed that same day (2 Peter 3:9) " ... the earth and the works therein shall be burned up". The gospel is to be preached in all the world until Christ returns: thus there seems little room for 'A Millenium' or "1,000 years reign". Luke 21:24 gives no information re Jerusalem's future but Peter says "the earth" (with Jerusalem, New York and London etc) will be destroyed. Rom. 11:25 says nothing about Jews returning to Palestine, and National Israel will never be reconstituted: even if it could be. Surely no rational Bible student can really believe that the Levitical Priesthood will again preside over animal sacrifices in Jerusalem at a literal altar in a temple of stone: when Christ the Lamb had already died for sins. Surely the church even in N.T. times suffered greatly from Judaizers, and Paul wrote much to counteract such influence, expressing amazement that Christians would want "to turn again to the weak and beggarly elements whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage." If, after "the times of the Gentiles" the Jews come to Christ in great numbers; this will be wonderful but it will have to happen before Christ's return on the 'last day'. The Jews are certainly not "written off" by God: for He still loves them and will save them, like all others, through the gospel of our Lord and Saviour.

EDITOR.