

The True Israel

Ezekiel 9:1–7, Revelation 7:1–8

Israel is a name that is well-known to Bible readers. However, it does not always have the same meaning. First, the historical background: “Israel” was the second name given to the patriarch Jacob (son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham) when he wrestled with the Angel of the LORD at Peniel, in Genesis 32. Jacob told the Angel, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The angel replied: “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel*, for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”¹ The name *Israel* means *God persists* or *let God persist*. Jacob had a large family, including twelve sons and a daughter. After the Angel of the LORD changed his name to Israel, his descendants were called “Israelites,” “the children of Israel,” or “the house of Israel.”

But Israel has two basic meanings: first, there is “Israel after the flesh” (1 Cor. 10:18)—a reference to circumcision, a cutting in the flesh around the male foreskin. God told Abraham to put the sign of the covenant—circumcision—on all his male seed. On that very same day, not only Abraham and his son Ishmael, age 13, were circumcised, but also Abraham’s servants and their children. All the male seed—his physical descendants—were to be circumcised on the eighth day, as well as all the male members of his servants’ households. The wives and daughters of those who were circumcised were considered circumcised and included in the covenant people as well. But we are told that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom. 9:6 ESV).

So *Israel* has a second meaning, and that is the *true* Israel: those who follow in the *faith* of Abraham. This is its meaning in Psalm 73:1, “Truly God is good to *Israel*, to such as are pure in heart.” Truly God is good to Israel, that is, to those who are Israel not only *outwardly*, but also *inwardly*. In Deuteronomy 10:16 God requires: “Circumcise your *hearts*.” Romans says, “He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the *heart*, in the Spirit” (Rom. 2:29). This is what the apostle Paul calls “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16)— the true Israel.

So as we consider the topic “The True Israel” today, we are talking about those who are Israel *outwardly*, but also *inwardly*, that is, those who are circumcised in heart, who are born again by the Holy Spirit, who have been brought from the darkness of sin to the light of the Gospel, who know that they are sinners, who are depending on Christ alone for their salvation, who love the God of the Bible with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. Hopefully, that includes you! In our text today, these true Israelites are spared the judgment that will come upon the Christ-rejectors. I have three points this afternoon: (1) separated and sealed, (2) saved to serve, and (3) the Lord knows those who are his. First,

¹ Gen. 32:28

1. Separated and Sealed

John writes, “After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the *seal* of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have *sealed* the servants of our God on their foreheads.’ And I heard the number of those who were *sealed*. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.”

Here, clearly, the Lord of heaven is separating the righteous from the wicked. He sends out four angels who had been appointed to mete out God’s judgment upon *apostate* Israel. At the same time, the servants of God are *sealed*—spared from judgment.

Apostasy is renunciation of previous commitment to the true God. An apostate is a person who previously confessed the true faith and later renounced that faith. In the case of the Jews at the time of Christ, it is a person who once confessed the true faith with the congregation of Israel: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,”² a person who was waiting for the promised Messiah, but then later, when the Messiah came, turned against him and sided with his enemies.

A current example is Bart Ehrman, once an evangelical Christian; a graduate of Moody Bible Institute, a scholar of New Testament Greek, now a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has renounced the Christian faith and has become an atheist working to undermine the faith. He’s not in the same class as a person who never heard the gospel, and died without Christ. Rather, here is a man who once professed the faith and now has become an enemy to the faith—an enemy of Christ. His guilt is the greater.

Remember that when Jesus was born, there were two older saints in Jerusalem brought by the Spirit into the temple: Simeon and Anna. Simeon was described as “just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel . . . the Lord’s Christ.” Anna was an 84-year-old widow “who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day . . . and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.” So in Jerusalem at the time of Christ’s birth there were those who were not merely Jews according to the flesh, but true believers whose very lives were centered on the Old Testament promises. They were waiting for the coming of the Messiah and looked for redemption in Jerusalem. They were looking not only for a political savior who could deliver the

² Deut. 6:4–5

Jews from the shackles of Rome; they were waiting for the promised Savior, the Word made flesh.

But when the promised Messiah came, the Lord Jesus Christ, he was a disappointment to many Israelites. Rather than mobilize an army to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression, Jesus came to save his people from their sins. Israel according to the flesh didn't want to hear words like "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matt. 23:33). They didn't want to be told how *bad* they were; they wanted to hear how *good* they were. A lot of people today have the same attitude. They want the preacher to tell them how good they are.

When Jesus preached, the scribes and Pharisees were highly offended and plotted to kill him! It came to a climax when the Jewish leaders contracted with Judas Iscariot, giving him 30 pieces of silver if he would betray Jesus. He waited for his opportunity.

During his trial Pilate said to the people, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" . . . But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release to you?' They said, '*Barabbas!*' Pilate said to them, 'What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said to him, '*Let Him be crucified!*'" (Matt. 27:17ff.).

The apostle John was writing about 35 years or so after the time that Old Testament Israel became officially apostate. The end was going to come for covenant breakers.

In our text, the four angels hold the four "winds" of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on *any tree*. Throughout the Bible, trees are symbols for the righteous.

Psalms 1:3: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a *tree* planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

Psalms 92:12-14, "The righteous shall flourish like a *palm tree*, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing."

Isaiah 61:3, "That they may be called *trees of righteousness*, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified."

The “wind” in Scripture is used in connection with the coming of God and the action of His angels in either blessing or curse.

In Genesis 8:1, after the LORD had destroyed the earth by a great flood, we read that “God made a *wind* to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided.”

In Exodus 10:13, “Moses stretched out his rod over the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought *an east wind* on the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, *the east wind* brought the locusts.” In verse 19, “the Lord turned a *very strong west wind*, which took the locusts away and blew them into the Red Sea. There remained not one locust in all the territory of Egypt.”

Then in Exodus 14:21, “Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a *strong east wind* all that night, and made the [Red] sea into dry land, and the waters were divided,” so the Israelites could march through on dry land.

In Exodus 15:10, speaking of this, the people said, “You blew with Your *wind*, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters.”

Psalms 107:25–27, “He commands and raises the *stormy wind*, which lifts up the waves of the sea. They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to the depths; their soul melts because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits’ end.”

Psalms 148:7–8, “Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all the depths; fire and hail, snow and clouds; *stormy wind*, fulfilling His word;

John 3:8, “The *wind* blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Acts 2:1, “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a *rushing mighty wind*.”

Here, then are multiple examples of the Lord God of heaven using the wind, either to bless or to curse.

This very week we have seen the power of the wind to spread deadly fire around Los Angeles, destroying thousands of acres, thousands of buildings, causing untold misery. Is this all a coincidence? No. God is in heaven, working out all the counsel of his will. He is teaching man the dangers of ignoring him. He is urging us to return to God. We pray that God’s people will be spared, but there have been testimonies similar to Job’s: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15). Modern man, with all his advances in technology, thinks that he can safeguard himself from God’s righteous judgment, but Southern California, with all its wealth and learning, cannot control the power of the God’s mighty wind.

Chilton comments: The four angels are restraining the judgment in obedience to the command of another angel, whom . . . John sees ascending from the rising of

the sun . . . This angel comes as the representative of Christ, the Sunrise from on high who has visited us (Luke 1:78), the Sun of righteousness who has risen with healing in His wings . . . *He* possesses the Spirit without measure (John 3:34), the Seal of the living God with which He marks out the people of His own possession, and by His order the judgments on the Land are not fully poured out until Christ and His messengers have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads: The Seal of the Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30) is applied to the righteous before the Seals of wrath are applied to the wicked; Pentecost precedes Holocaust.

“If God’s wrath were to be unleashed upon Israel . . . what would become of the Church? What about the faithful who find themselves in the midst of a collapsing civilization? Would the believing remnant be destroyed in the coming conflagration along with the enemies of the faith? The answer given in these visions is that ‘God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Thess. 5:9): The Church will be preserved.”³

In the judgment of the sixth seal, God’s people were *separated* and *sealed*. The second point is this:

2. Saved to Serve

In verse 3, those who are separated and sealed are identified as “the *servants* of our God.”

The word for servant is δοῦλος, which literally means *slave*. The NASB regularly translates it as “bond-servant.” In the case of a Christian, a man or woman, born-again by the Spirit, becomes the willing bond-servant of the Lord God. Members of our church have taken the following vow:

“*Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord* and promise that you will serve him, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?”

One of Charles Wesley’s beloved hymns begins with these lines: “Ye *servants* of God, your Master proclaim, and publish abroad his wonderful name.”⁴ It is a great honor to be the servant of the risen Christ! He gave himself for us; can we do anything less than give ourselves for him? He loved us and gave himself for us, so that we can be forever with him in heaven!

The idea of sealing is plainly taught in Scripture.

2 Corinthians 1:22, “Who hath also *sealed* us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.”

Ephesians 1:13, “In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were *sealed* with that holy Spirit of promise.”

³ David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, 201

⁴ <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/ye-servants-of-god-your-master-proclaim/>

Ephesians 4:30, “Grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are *sealed* unto the day of redemption.

The believing Israelites were sealed, so they would not be swept away in judgment.

3. The Lord Knows Those Who are His

2 Timothy 2:19, “Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, *The Lord knoweth them that are his*. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

John writes, “And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.”

The number 144,000 has been the source of much speculation. The early Jehovah’s Witnesses in the 19th century saw themselves as the fulfillment of it. But the number had been fulfilled in the first century!

Chilton observes that it is obviously symbolic: “. . . twelve (the number of Israel) squared, then multiplied by 1000 . . . John pictures for us the ideal Israel, Israel as it was meant to be, in all its perfection, symmetry, and completeness; the holy Army of God, mustered for battle according to her thousands. The “thousand” was the basic military division in the camp of Israel. . . . This is the significance of Micah’s famous prophecy of the Nativity: Even though Bethlehem is too small to be counted “among the thousands of Judah,” too insignificant to be considered seriously in the nation’s military strategy, yet “from you One will go forth for Me to be Ruler in Israel,” the King who will establish God’s justice and peace to the ends of the earth (Micah 5).

Again to quote Chilton: “When John hears the names of the names shouted out, he is listening to the military roll-call of the Lord’s hosts. In this case, each of the twelve tribes is able to field twelve full divisions, a numerically perfect army of 144,000 soldiers of the Lord.”

Judgment will assuredly be poured out upon the apostates of the Old Covenant, but the church herself—the true Israel—is not in danger! So it is in every age.

As Milton Terry put it, “The purpose of the sealing was to preserve the true Israel of God as a holy seed. It was not designed to save them from tribulation, but to preserve them in the midst of the great tribulation about to come and to glorify them thereby. Though the old Israel be cast off, a new and holy Israel is to be chosen and sealed with the Spirit of the living God.”⁵

This text shows us that God is able to preserve his people through great tribulation.

A recent issue of *Voice of the Martyrs* features photos and stories of Nigerian Christian widows whose husbands have been killed by Islamic militants. Here are

⁵ Milton Terry, *Biblical Apocalypics: A Study of the Most Notable Revelations of God and of Christ in the Canonical Scriptures* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1898), p. 336, cited in Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, 206

women—many responsible for the care and support of young children—who suddenly lost their husbands in unspeakable crimes. They are suddenly homeless, with no means of support. Yet by the grace of God they have been enabled even to forgive their husbands' killers. God is preserving them, and they are keeping the faith.

What about us? In this world we have tribulation, but we have a great God who promises to provide all our needs and bring us into his heavenly kingdom. No matter what the trouble, he will *never* leave us nor forsake us. Amen.