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Has God Replaced Israel?

Revelation 11

Keywords: Revelation, prophecy, End Times, Judgment, Two Witnesses, Temple

PowerPoint Presentation included: None

SermonAudio Blurb: In this interlude John describes both a temple in Jerusalem during the Tribulation and two mysterious “witnesses” who both declare a true testimony to a rebellious world, suffer martyrdom and are raised from the dead. In this sermon a key theological issue is raised and explained regarding how the Christian is to view the nation of Israel, especially in how she relates to the future, Revelation and God’s plan.

I. Introduction.

- A. Read chapter 11:1-14.
- B. A challenging chapter but not in any real sense.
 1. The challenge is due to various ways Revelation is approached by various groups.
 2. More than this, there is the even stronger influence of theological presuppositions that essentially drive you toward certain conclusions.
 - a. We all have them, though for many they are not well defined.
 - b. If God is all-loving then how can there be a literal, real hell? And how can He punish people for eternity?
 - c. Science is superior over the bible’s revelation. Therefore we should not take anything the bible states about creation, humanity and such in any literal or serious manner.
 3. What happens is that because of certain theological assumptions the passage we just read does not mean at all what it appears to mean.
 - a. I listened to sermons on this passage and read many pages by commentators only to hear over and over that the temple mentioned in vss 1-2 can’t be a temple in any normal sense.
 - b. In a similar way the two witnesses aren’t two people in reality. They represent something else entirely. The death they die is not a death in any real sense.

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- c. The end result was a quite complex passage for the commentator or preacher had only one of two choices most of the way through it.
 - (1) Ignore the details as unimportant to the overall symbolism.
 - (2) Take the listeners and readers to many other passages to use them to help the point that it does not mean what it actually says.

- C. My concern with this section is how to best present it pastorally.
 - 1. One option is just to preach it as I would handle it and leave it there. But it does not equip you in any way to deal with objections you will likely come across by others.
 - 2. Another option is to preach each point as I think it should be, but also address the major differences of opinion that are held by others. But this one gives me a headache. And it likely would be more confusing than helpful.
 - 3. The third option was to pause and give a broad theological lesson on the nature of bible interpretation and the role of theological systems. This, though, would be so extensive that I fear we would forget to ever come back to Revelation.
 - 4. The fourth is to pause for one sermon, much like I did in chapter 10, and teach on one key doctrine that creates so much of the problems and differences of interpretation of certain passages. This is the one I decided was wisest.

- D. My goal is to make this interesting but also helpful for each of you.
 - 1. For some you will be tempted to check out, don't. You will retain more than you realize if you simply stick with it.
 - 2. For others, I hope it will help you begin to realize the type of forces that exist beneath every article, conversation, sermon and book that you come across. Too often we don't realize what is going on behind the scenes.
 - 3. For all of you, I hope that you will remember that this is but one message on a topic that is hugely important and far bigger than what one message can contain.
 - 4. My goal is to go back and forth in this message, giving broader and simpler statements and explanations and then moving toward more complex ones for those who are better versed on the subject.

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- E. Few theological issues are as hotly debated as the Israel/church issue and the fact that you perhaps never have debated this subject does not make the importance of the subject go away.
1. At issue is whether the New Testament church replaces, fulfills, and/or displaces national Israel as the people of God.
 2. To be honest, even my title of the sermon is one that would elicit much uproar in certain circles.
 - a. The new term that is in vogue right now is “supersessionism;” which means to “sit on.” In other words you are sitting where someone else sat, replacing them.
 - b. I am going to normally use “replacement theology” myself, acknowledging that some will take issue over it.
 - (1) Example would be one man who said, “. . . I would rather use the term ‘fulfillment theology.’ Israel was simply a picture of the true people of God, which the church fulfills.” (Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered*, 203)
 - (2) It worth noting his last sentence, for it captures the issue at hand well.

II. The issue:

- A. At the core, the question is what do we do with the nation of Israel?
1. 2/3's of the bible is about Israel and the prophets of the Old Testament gave many explicit statements about the future of Israel, one where God would gather them to Himself once again after a time of rejection.
 - a. (Remember the context of the Old Testament prophets, they were speaking not in times of blessing but under the curse of God).
 - b. Malachi 1:1-3, 6-11 gives the problem in Israel.
 - c. Malachi 2:1-4 gives the deeper problem in the priesthood but also the concern of God regarding His faithfulness to the covenant with the priesthood.
 - d. Malachi 3:1-4 gives a word of hope in these two messengers, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. In these few verses Malachi covers the first and second coming of our Lord.

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- e. Malachi 4 again makes reference to a coming time of great judgment that ultimately ends up in restoring both the people and the land.
2. The Old Testament is replete with promises to the nation that simply have no fulfillment now.

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "When I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, 'The LORD our righteousness.' Therefore behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when they will no longer say, 'As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt,' but, 'As the LORD lives, who brought up and led back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.' Then they will live on their own soil." **(Jeremiah 23:5-8)**

Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy. Though I fall I will rise; Though I dwell in darkness, the LORD is a light for me. I will bear the indignation of the LORD Because I have sinned against Him, Until He pleads my case and executes justice for me. He will bring me out to the light, And I will see His righteousness. Then my enemy will see, And shame will cover her who said to me, "Where is the LORD your God?" My eyes will look on her; At that time she will be trampled down Like mire of the streets. It will be a day for building your walls. On that day will your boundary be extended. It will be a day when they will come to you From Assyria and the cities of Egypt, From Egypt even to the Euphrates, Even from sea to sea and mountain to mountain. And the earth will become desolate because of her inhabitants, On account of the fruit of their deeds. Shepherd Your people with Your scepter, The flock of Your possession Which dwells by itself in the woodland, In the midst of a fruitful field. Let them feed in Bashan and Gilead As in the days of old. "As in the days when you came out from the land of Egypt, I will show you miracles." Nations will see and be ashamed Of all their might. They will put their hand on their mouth, Their ears will be deaf. They will lick the dust like a serpent, Like reptiles of the earth. They will come trembling out of their fortresses; To the LORD our God they will come in dread And they will be afraid before You. Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob And unchanging love to Abraham, Which You swore to our forefathers From the days of old. **(Micah 7:8-20)**

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'But now I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days,' declares the LORD of hosts. 'For there will be peace for the seed: the vine will yield its fruit, the land will yield its produce and the heavens will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these things. 'It will come about that just as you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you that you may become a blessing. Do not fear; let your hands be strong.' "For thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Just as I purposed to do harm to you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,' says the LORD of hosts, 'and I have not relented, so I have again purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear! 'These are the things which you should do: speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates. 'Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,' declares the LORD.'" Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'The fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh and the fast of the tenth months will become joy, gladness, and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah; so love truth and peace.' "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities. 'The inhabitants of one will go to another, saying, "Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I will also go." 'So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.' "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"" (**Zechariah 8:11-23**)

- a. These and countless others have no fulfillment in the end when God makes all things new. In fact in many of these types of passages the nations are coming to Jerusalem to worship. There is sin still occurring. But the nation is under the blessing and care of their Lord.
3. So the issue becomes where one fits these into the biblical time line.
 - a. They can't be now for nothing comes close to fulfilling them.
 - b. They can't be in the new heavens and earth for sin is still present.
 - c. Therefore there are really two choices, aside from rejecting them flat-out.
 - (1) There is going to be a future blessing of the nation that is nothing like anything seen to date.

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- (2) Somehow these promises are now to be seen in a spiritual/figurative manner that does not involve the nation of Israel.

III. Three main views on replacing Israel.

A. Replacement based on sin.

1. This view holds that due to the wicked and rebellious acts as a nation it has lost its right to be called the “people of God.”
2. This view was very common in the early church from the 300's on.
3. Luther is another one who thought this, ““Listen, Jew, are you aware that Jerusalem and your sovereignty, together with your temple and priesthood, have been destroyed for over 1,460 years?” . . . For such ruthless wrath of God is sufficient evidence that they assuredly have erred and gone astray. . . . Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God.”
(Martin Luther, *LW* 47:138-39)

B. Replacement based on an over-arching narrative.

1. This is a more subtle argument that can be harder to follow.
2. Essentially it sees that over-arching the whole bible are some key events that control everything. They are the creation of Adam and Eve, the Fall of Man, the Incarnation, and the final restoration of all things.
3. Note what major event is skipped—it essentially ignores the Old Testament after Genesis 3.
4. The result is that the Old Testament has little or no voice in the plan and purposes of God.

C. Replacement based on Christ’s first coming and establishing of the Church.

1. This is the view that most people will encounter.
2. Here the whole thing centers around Jesus Christ and His first coming/birth.
3. It is described in different ways but essentially Jesus becomes the true Israel and therefore those who are saved are also the true Israel.

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4. The nation of Israel was never intended to be the recipient of God's care and blessing for all time.
 - a. It was the incubator of those who really believed in the Old Testament and therefore were those who truly were Israelites.
 - b. So when Jesus came the role that Israel played in God's saving plan basically expired.
5. Now that Jesus has come Israel as a nation in God's plan is done. It all focuses upon the Church.
6. In a similar way we do not look nor expect a temple to be present in the future for Israel, for Jesus is the true temple.
7. This also affects how you are to view the promises in the Old Testament like those we read together. They are representative of this time we currently live. Any promises are to be seen either as spiritually fulfilled in some way or awaiting the final judgment when all things are made new.

IV. Why this matters.

- A. If we are concerned about only ourselves as individuals, then this doesn't matter much in the short term.
 1. But in doing so you end up missing the entire point of the bible and the work of Jesus Christ.
 2. You create, without often realizing it, an idol of yourself for that is what ultimately matters. You. How you feel. What you take away from a lesson or sermon or book.
- B. But if you realize that there is a mighty drama that God is doing since creation and we are players in it then you begin to want to get your part right.
 1. The book of Romans is a good example. Often seen as Paul's theology (Ephesians is a better choice for that).
 - a. Really it is a first and foremost a plea for the Jew and Gentile believers to get along.
 - b. And to do this Paul lays out over many chapters the plan of God among both Israel and the Gentile world.

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2. We could just spend the hour looking at passage after passage that speaks in broad, sweeping language of the mysterious and sovereign work of God among the nations. One example, Deuteronomy 31:15-21.
- C. If you can get a proper understanding of the place and role of Israel in the biblical story you get the end of the story right.
1. To the degree that you make Israel, as a nation, disappear from the plan of God in the end; to that degree you end up in error on so many passages dealing with the last days.
 2. This makes dealing with so many passages in both the Old and New Testament so much easier.
- D. It makes many passages easier to interpret, even if they leave you with questions.
1. And this is where I bring it back to the beginning. In Revelation 11 you have a temple being measured. And you have two witnesses who do mighty works of God and are killed and are raised.
 - a. These are clearly stated. And in the passage there is even explicitly stated symbolic language that is distinct from the rest of the passage.
 - b. That doesn't mean there are questions raised. Even very big questions. But they are raised within the meaning of the text.
 2. But if you reject first that there is ever to be another temple, for example, especially in the plan of God, then these words can't mean what they say.
 3. This is not to say there is not symbolic language or poetic language in the bible. But there is not secret language that requires the right "code" to know it.
- E. It helps keep us a bit more humble and slow to speak on things we may not have studied well.
1. I taught a class the deals with the complex issues related to how the Old Testament and New Testament relate to each other.
 2. My goal in it was not to make all things clear. But it was to make it clear that there is a lot more going on in the bible and in interpretation than most realize.
- F. Finally, it makes the promises of God one's we can truly rest upon.

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1. If the nation of Israel is truly the elect of God and one whom God made irrevocable covenants and promises, then we must be content there.
2. How do you truly say the promises of God are true for us, the Church, when those very promises once belonged to Israel, but are now revoked, rescinded or somehow superceded?

V. Benediction/Doxology.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Small Group Questions

- **Summer Break**