

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Five

LIFE BEYOND THE BROKEN COVENANT

We have been seeing that coming to faith in Christ is not just an adjustment or improvement on our part. It rightly and necessarily involves being put to death and being raised to life:

you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).

We may resile from such a total destruction and complete rebuilding, out of fear that we may not survive the process. Such a fear would be well-founded: there is nothing in ourselves that might commend us for eternal life. If we were to be raised from death, it would need to be an action of great mercy and grace on God's part. How could we be sure that this might be the case?

While we have seen that what Jesus did on the cross encompassed the whole human race, so far we have been focussing particularly on the impact it has on individual persons. In this session we stand back to survey some Old Testament history, to trace this dynamic of death and life in the experience of Israel and, by extension, in the human race as a whole. In this we will be shown both the sureness and the thoroughgoing nature of God's redemption of us.

A Teacher of Israel

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about being 'born from above' or 'born anew' (John 3:3, 7), which is to be 'born of water and Spirit', by which we 'enter the kingdom of God' (John 3:5). Again, we like to think that this comes to us as a kind of additive to what we already are, which takes us on into a new dimension of living. Jesus speaking of his death in connection with new birth (John 3:14; see below) gives the lie to this. New birth is nothing other than what is spoken of by Paul in this way:¹

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived . . . But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him . . . (Eph. 2:1–2, 4–6).

When Nicodemus asked Jesus, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him:

Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? (John 3:10).

¹ See further the New Creation Teaching Ministry Winter School 2006, *Born Anew to a Living Hope*, available in mp3 and DVD formats; especially Noel Due's study on 'Generation, Degeneration, Regeneration'.
See <www.sermonaudio.com/newcreation>

Jesus expected that God's dealings with Israel, as taught in the Old Testament scriptures, would afford ample evidence of the need and actuality of new birth through being put to death and raised to life. This we will now examine.

My Covenant Which They Broke

We begin at Jeremiah 31:31–34 (RSV):

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

God goes on to say that this is as sure and secure as God's setting up and ordering of all that He has made, in the relationship He has with the whole of creation (vv. 35–37; compare 33:17–22). This promise of a new covenant, then, is a substantial declaration, rooted in God's own nature and purpose in creation.

It comes on the heels of 'my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband'—a covenant of strong and intimate relationship, that now lies in the ruins of abused trust and love. What is the covenant that was broken? The one made when God brought Israel out of Egypt—with Moses at Sinai. This is the covenant that we will now look at. It is given in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, but it is in Deuteronomy that it is spelled out with reference to Israel's sojourn in the promised land.

The Blessings and the Cursings

The covenant was in very explicit terms. In Deuteronomy 27:9–26, Israel is urged to keep the commandments of the covenant, and cursings are pronounced on certain detailed breaches of the law, including idolatry, dishonouring of parents, wrongful acquisition of property, mistreatment of the disabled and the disadvantaged, illicit sexuality, and murder. These curses end with:

'Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!' (Deut. 27:26).

In Deuteronomy 28:1–14, the blessings of keeping the covenant are enumerated:

If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God (Deut. 28:1–2).

These blessings give comprehensive coverage of every aspect of life, wherever people are; over the people's work and produce, their movements, their way of life, their relationships with their enemies and with other nations, in the weather, and in their financial dealings.

These blessings are reversed into cursings in Deuteronomy 28:15–68:

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you (Deut. 28:15).

The cursings given are more detailed and protracted than the blessings. How are we to account for that? Is God more intent on bringing cursings than blessings? Perhaps the explanation lies with ourselves. We read in Ecclesiastes 7:29:

God made human beings straightforward, but they have devised many schemes.

Other translations render this:

God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices (RSV).

God made man simple; man's complex problems are of his own devising (Jerusalem Bible).

Goodness is clear and straightforward—we simply obey God, and enjoy His blessings. Evil is more devious, complicated, and tortuous. It takes much more for God to deal with evil, and to pursue it to the end of its labyrinthine contortions.

The end of God's judgement on Israel's disobedience will be their subjugation and destruction at the hand of their enemies, until they are reduced to desperate measures:

Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and lack of everything. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you. The LORD will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favor to the young. It shall consume the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed, leaving you neither grain, wine, and oil, nor the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, until it has made you perish. It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout your land; it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout the land that the LORD your God has given you. In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the LORD your God has given you (Deut. 28:47–53)

At the end of the road lies their scattering and exile as a nation:

And just as the LORD took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so the LORD will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction; you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known. Among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit. Your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, with no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, 'If only it were evening!' and at evening you shall say, 'If only it were morning!'—because of the dread that your heart shall feel and the sights that your eyes shall see. The LORD will bring you back in ships to Egypt, by a route that I promised you would never see again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer (Deut. 28:63–68).

Note the word 'scatter' in verse 64, to which we shall return.

The Exile of Israel

The subsequent history of Israel is an outworking of those blessings and cursings, right up to the very last. In 2 Kings 17:7–18, the reason is given for the conquest, destruction and exile of the northern kingdom of Israel:

This occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshiped other gods . . . The people of Israel secretly did things that were not right against the LORD their God . . . They

did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger; they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, ‘You shall not do this’ . . . They rejected all the commandments of the LORD their God . . . until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had foretold through all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day (2 Kings 17:7, 9, 11–12, 16, 23).

The southern kingdom of Judah is accused of the same sins in verse 19:

Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced.

This came to a head in the reign of Manasseh:

The LORD said by his servants the prophets, ‘Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols; therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line for Samaria, and the plummet for the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies; they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this day’ (2 Kings 21:10–15).

The event itself is summarised in 2 Chronicles 36:15–20:

The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place; but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD against his people became so great that there was no remedy. Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their youths with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or young woman, the aged or the feeble; he gave them all into his hand. All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon. They burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

There were some people left in the land, and where did they end up going? Against the word of the Lord by the prophet Jeremiah, they ended up going to Egypt, where they were overtaken by sword, famine and pestilence (see Jer. 42–44).

All this happened exactly as foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy. Moses went on to say that, for any whose hearts turn away from the Lord to serve other gods:

All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and the LORD will blot out their names from under heaven . . . The next generation, your children who rise up after you, as well as the foreigner who comes from a distant country, will see the devastation of that land and the afflictions with which the LORD has afflicted it—all its soil burned out by sulfur and salt, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, unable to support any vegetation, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD destroyed in his fierce anger—they and indeed all the nations will wonder, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this land? What caused this great display of anger?’ They will conclude, ‘It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their ancestors, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. They turned and served other gods, worshiping them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them; so the anger of the LORD was kindled against that land, bringing on it every curse written in this book. The LORD uprooted them from their land in anger, fury, and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as is now the case (Deut 29:20–28).

While the exodus from Egypt is foundational to Israel's life as a nation, it is remarkable how much of the Old Testament is preoccupied with the prediction, the lead-up, the execution, and the aftermath, of the exile. It is as if God is saying that this is something Israel, and we, must know about extensively and understand in full. If we wonder why God should see it necessary to go to such extremes, perhaps again the answer lies in the perverse and wilful obduracy of human sin, and the catastrophic lengths that God must go to in order to deal with it. P. T. Forsyth, writing in the middle of the calamitous First World War, caught its measure:

But if God spared not His own Son, He will spare no historic convulsion needful for His kingdom.²

The Gathering

After all that, we may well think that would be the end. Full stop; end of story. It would be quite right if that were so. Where else is there to go, once all the blessings and all the curses have been fully worked through, to the end point?

But this is not the case. Immediately after Deuteronomy 29 comes Deuteronomy 30:

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you. Then you shall again obey the LORD, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut. 30:1–10).

Against all that has gone before, this is a new and unexpected turn of events on God's part, which entails an unprecedented change of heart on the part of the people. Our familiarity with the whole sweep of scripture may prevent us from seeing the seismic shift that has occurred between these two chapters. What happens here is not just the next step in the process. This is sheer grace that goes beyond any logic and any process.

This is an entirely new act of God, way beyond any capacity on our part. Earlier in Deuteronomy, the Lord had laid an instruction on Israel:

Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer (Deut. 10:14–16).

Since circumcision was a sign of faithfulness in the covenant of God (see Gen. 17), this was a call for a cutting away of fleshly sin and rebellion, and a turning to full-hearted intimacy

² P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, Blackwood, (1917) 1988, p. 194.

with God. It is an instruction that, as we have seen, was not followed by Israel. Now in Deuteronomy 30, God is saying that He Himself will carry through this instruction in which they have failed:

Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live (Deut. 30:6).

In the vision given to Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, this restoration of Israel is seen as nothing less than raising the dead:

Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD (Ezek. 37:12–14).

In the previous chapter, it is spoken of in these terms:

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances (Ezek. 36:24–27).

Is this what Jesus was referring to when he said to Nicodemus, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit’ (John 3:5)? Certainly these are the things that Nicodemus should have known.

We find this seismic change, not just in Deuteronomy 30, but through the whole of the scriptures. Isaiah’s ‘Nothing shall be left’, speaking of the coming of Babylon against Israel in Isaiah 39:6, is characteristically followed by ‘comfort my people’ and the promise of overflowing restoration in Isaiah 40:1. Compare with that these other similar passages:

For you shall be like an oak
whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.
The strong shall become like tinder,
and their work like a spark;
they and their work shall burn together,
with no one to quench them . . .
In days to come
the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Isa. 1:30–2:3).

They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined . . .
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 8:21–9:2, 6).

Look, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the tallest trees will be cut down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.
A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots . . . (Isa. 10:33–11:1).

Like a woman with child,
who writhes and cries out in her pangs
when she is near her time,
so were we because of you, O LORD;
we were with child, we writhed,
but we gave birth only to wind.
We have won no victories on earth,
and no one is born to inhabit the world.
Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew,
and the earth will give birth to those long dead (Isa. 26:17–19).

In each of these instances, as with Isaiah's own personal despair and restoration in Isaiah 6, a situation of utter hopelessness is followed immediately with a profound reversal of the situation by the saving action of God. Judgement on unfaithfulness surely comes, but God and His promises remain, and will be fulfilled, after the people have forfeited them, by the Lord's own hand.

This is not just a general pattern of God's action, that we can count on as an automatic expectation. This is the one great gracious act of God in human history, centred on the coming of Messiah. We cannot say, 'Oh—that is what God always does'. We can only say: 'This is what God has done'.

The Bearing of the Judgement

This is not something that God can just do gratuitously. There need to be some actual grounds on which God does this. In Zechariah 11–13 we find the strange figure of the shepherd, at a time when the shepherd-leaders of Israel had utterly failed. Much of this is couched in terms of prophetic acted parable, and is not always easy to understand, but we can get the general gist.

It begins with a rather unpromising assignment, in a less than congenial environment:

Thus said the LORD my God: Be a shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. Those who buy them kill them and go unpunished; and those who sell them say, 'Blessed be the LORD, for I have become rich'; and their own shepherds have no pity on them (Zech. 11:4–5).

Clearly this is a situation in which the people are being oppressed and exploited by their rulers, into which the prophet is being called to play a role. God is going to hand the people over to this judgement, with this prophet–shepherd in their midst. The scope here is broader than just that of Israel. This is a matter that affects the whole earth:

For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the earth, says the LORD. I will cause them, every one, to fall each into the hand of a neighbor, and each into the hand of the king; and they shall devastate the earth, and I will deliver no one from their hand (Zech. 11:6).

The prophet–shepherd takes up the implements of his trade, to which a certain significance is attached, and assumes his role:

So, on behalf of the sheep merchants, I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. I took two staffs; one I named Favor, the other I named Unity, and I tended the sheep (Zech. 11:7).

He is led to take some unpopular actions, with the result that he is brought to the point where he resigns his commission:

In one month I disposed of the three shepherds, for I had become impatient with them, and they also detested me. So I said, 'I will not be your shepherd. What is to die, let it die; what is to be destroyed, let it be destroyed; and let those that are left devour the flesh of one another!' I took my staff Favor and broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. So it was annulled on that day, and the sheep merchants, who were watching me, knew that it was the word of the LORD (Zech. 11:8–11).

Whatever this may mean, it looks very much like the breaking of the covenant, and the coming to the end of it, with no recourse. This is a covenant not just with Israel, but 'with all the peoples'. It has universal implications.

The prophet–shepherd is paid off for his services, undervalued at the price of a slave (see Exod. 21:32):

I then said to them, 'If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them.' So they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. Then the LORD said to me, 'Throw it into the treasury' [Syr: Heb. *it to the potter*]*—*this lordly price at which I was valued by them. So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them into the treasury [Syr: Heb. *it to the potter*] in the house of the LORD (Zech. 11:12–13).

We are aware of the connection Matthew makes between this passage and the betrayal of Jesus by Judas (see Matt. 27:3–10).

Then I broke my second staff Unity, annulling the family ties between Judah and Israel (Zech. 11:14).

This is the final breakdown of the family.

Now that they have come to the end of the road, the Lord is going to put a 'worthless shepherd' in charge of the people—one who will not care for them at all, but rather the reverse. At the same time, God then calls His prophet to act out, as a sign, the part of this worthless shepherd:

Then the LORD said to me: Take once more the implements of a worthless shepherd. For I am now raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs (Zech. 11:15–16).

This worthless shepherd, paralleled now by the prophet who is playing his part, deserves nothing better than to be struck down:

Oh, my worthless shepherd,
who deserts the flock!
May the sword strike his arm
and his right eye!
Let his arm be completely withered,
his right eye utterly blinded! (Zech. 11:17).

In Zechariah 12 there is an apocalyptic battle, in which Jerusalem is under siege, but the nations that come against Jerusalem come off second-best, because God is in Jerusalem as a strength and protection. In the middle of this, strangely, there will be ‘one [the Hebrew is literally *me*] whom they have pierced’. When they look on him, and see what has happened and what they have done to him, God will pour out ‘a spirit of compassion and supplication’ on the perpetrators, and there will be great mourning and bitter weeping. This is picked up in John’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus: ‘They will look on the one whom they have pierced’ (John 19:37); and it is extended to all the peoples of the earth in Revelation 1:7:

Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
So it is to be. Amen.

Then, astoundingly, we read:

On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity (Zech. 13:1).

It would appear this relates to the equally astonishing promise given in Zechariah 3:9:

I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.

Where has this come from? How can this be? We read on. All the idolatrous false prophets, motivated by ‘the unclean spirit’, are silenced and dispensed with. One, it appears, is left. The figure of the prophet–shepherd re-emerges—the man who belongs to God and is associated with Him. This one, who has identified himself with the worthless shepherd (see Zech. 11:15–17), now stands in his place, ready to receive the deadly blow, as God Himself delivers the terrible decree:

‘Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,
against the man who is my associate,’
says the LORD of hosts.
Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be
scattered (Zech. 13:7).

This striking comes at the same time as the final judgement of scattering happens to the sheep. As it turns out, however, this judgement is a refining one for those who remain:

I will turn my hand against the little ones.
In the whole land, says the LORD,
two-thirds shall be cut off and perish,
and one-third shall be left alive.
And I will put this third into the fire,
refine them as one refines silver,
and test them as gold is tested (Zech. 13:7–9).

The outcome is a wonderful gathering of this purified people to God:

They will call on my name,
and I will answer them.
I will say, ‘They are my people’;
and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God’ (Zech. 13:9).

Fulfilled in Christ

We know that this is what Jesus had in his mind and heart as he went to the cross:

Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,
“I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”
But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee’ (Matt. 26:31–32).

Jesus clearly saw himself as the associate of God, the one at His right hand, commissioned by the Father to be the good shepherd, who stands in the place of the worthless ones, to receive the deserved striking that is due to them. Elsewhere he said:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again . . . I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:11, 17, 18).

At the same time as the striking occurs, comes the final judgement of the scattering of the sheep.³ This is the ultimate fulfilment of Deuteronomy 28:63: ‘The LORD will scatter you . . .’ Yet, as it turns out, this judgement, for those who remain, is a cleansing one (as in John 15:2–3). Jesus immediately promises that ‘after I am raised up’ they will meet him in Galilee. ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ (Matt. 4:15) is where the gathering of the nations to Christ begins (see Matt. 28:16–20).

Just before this, Jesus has said of the cup at the last meal:

Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom (Matt. 26:27–29).

The time of the new covenant of grace, after the final breaking of the old covenant—the transition between Deuteronomy 29 and Deuteronomy 30—has now come!

³ For some time I taught that the scattering here was a great mercy of God, to spare the sheep from being in the place where the sword of judgement would fall, so that Jesus could be there alone for them. Be that as it may, I am grateful to Amy Bettany who, as one of our Christian Workers’ Course students in 2003, pointed out to me, in connection with Zechariah 13:7, that the scattering is actually a judgement, and started me on this whole train of thinking.

The Exile and the Cross

We may be thinking: Surely the exile was over and finished four hundred years earlier, when a number of the people came back and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple, and everything was back the way it should have been! Actually, that was not the case. Israel remained a subjugated people, right up to the time of Jesus, while many remained in what was called ‘the dispersion’ (as in John 11:52; 1 Pet. 1:1). It is also clear from the accounts in Ezra and Nehemiah that the people who returned were still just as sinful as those who had gone into exile. Chapters 39–66 in the prophecy of Isaiah deal with the issue that the basic heart-problem of sin would still need to be addressed after the deliverance under Cyrus. And we have seen something of the terrible situation that persisted in the ‘post-exilic’ prophecy of Zechariah.

N. T. Wright tells us there were those in Israel in Jesus day who thought the exile was still happening, and who still looked for it to come to an end:

at least some Jews in this period understood the exile to be still continuing, since the return from Babylon had not brought that independence and prosperity which the prophets foretold. Roman occupation and overlordship was simply the mode that Israel’s continuing exile had now taken. Granted the high-flown nature of the prophecies of restoration the other side of exile (in, for instance, Isaiah or Ezekiel), it is inconceivable that any Jew living in the first century could seriously claim that these prophecies of return from exile had yet been fulfilled. As long as Herod and Pilate were in control of Palestine, Israel was still under the curse of Deuteronomy 29. This was not a matter of private theological judgment or insight, not a matter about which one needed to conduct theological debate. Paul’s opponents could not have objected to it, as though it were a tendentious or rationalizing theological judgment. It was a publicly observable fact.⁴

Wright cites some Qumran scholarship to back up his argument, but we do not need to go to the Dead Sea scrolls to find local evidence:

Anna . . . began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36, 38)

—that was still to come.

Jesus, in telling Nicodemus about being born anew, led him to the action of the cross:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14–15; compare John 12:31–33).

Interestingly, Jesus’ reference to Old Testament history in this connection was not to the exile, but to the incident of the poisonous serpents in Numbers 21:4–9. This was no less a death and life situation, in the context of God’s judgement on sin.

Paul saw Jesus on the cross to be bearing the curse of the law of God (as spelled out, for instance, in Deuteronomy 27–29). Certainly this would be consistent with Christ going out into the place of God-forsakenness (as in Mark 15:34):

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:13–14).

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 141. Drawing on Wright’s research here does not necessarily imply concurrence with all his conclusions on Pauline theology.

N. T. Wright draws it out this way:

The crucifixion of the Messiah is, one might say, the *quintessence* of the curse of the exile, and its climactic act.⁵

Grace for All the Nations

Note in Galatians 3:14 that the blessing comes, not just to Israel, but to the nations. This takes us back further than Moses, to Abraham, and before. It is not only Israel that was scattered in exile. The whole human race was sent into exile out of the garden of Eden (see Gen. 3:23–24). All nations were scattered as a judgement on their arrogant disobedience at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:9). In the face of this, God’s blessing to the nations was promised through Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Clearly the curse was borne by Christ, not just for Israel but for all the nations. Paul in the opening chapters of Romans makes it clear that both Gentiles and Jews need this great grace, and come into it by faith.

So Jesus, gathering the beginning of his disciples in ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ in Matthew 28:16–20, tells them to disciple ‘all nations’. This is given expression in Acts 2:5–11, where the mighty works of God are spoken of in a number of different languages. In Acts 1:8, Jesus had said that the apostles were to be his witnesses ‘in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’.

Paul the apostle found himself at the spearhead of this going out of the gospel to the nations. He speaks of this in Romans 10:5–10 where he quotes Deuteronomy 30:11–14 and applies it, not to the law given through Moses, but to the gospel of Christ:

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

In quoting Deuteronomy 30 in this way, Paul is saying that now is the time when Deuteronomy 30 is coming into operation—not in the return from exile four hundred years before, but in the going out of the gospel of grace now! Amazingly, following the full outworking of the curse, with Christ at its centre, God’s whole new thing of mercy and grace has begun. It is massive, and it is sure.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 151.