

“Things Written Aforetime”

Chosen But Stiff-necked

When Stephen told the Jews of his day that they were “stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears” (Acts 7:51), he was not saying anything new! God had perceived many centuries before that this was the perennial condition of His “chosen” people. Only a few days after God had spoken in thunderous tones from the top of Sinai, and had warned His people, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” and “Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image” (Exodus 20:3-4), they had made a golden calf to worship. God said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people” (Exodus 32:9). He wanted to destroy them on the spot, but Moses interceded. However, God placed conditions on the staying of His wrath. They were to put away their ornaments as an act of submission to God (Exodus 33:1-6).

When Moses returned to the mountain with the second set of stone tablets, God passed before Moses, and declared Himself to be both merciful and just, forgiving and condemning. But, Moses worshiped Him and boldly asked that He go “in the midst” of His people, even though they were stiff-necked, and in need of constant forgiveness (Exodus 34:1-9). God consented, but made a covenant with Israel, requiring them to reject and destroy any form of idolatry in their midst (Exodus 34:10-17).

God was later aroused to great wrath again, and threatened to destroy Israel, when they refused to go into Canaan (Numbers 13:1-14:35). He again yielded to the intercession of Moses, but He sent His people back into the wilderness to wander forty years, a year for each day that their tribal representatives had spent in their reconnaissance of the land of Canaan. This period of time served to allow that generation to die in the wilderness, and be denied their opportunity to dwell in the promised land. When they came to the point of entering Canaan the second time, Israel, now purged of its rebels, was warned against thinking that they deserved to have the land. God said, “Hear, O Israel: thou art to pass over the Jordan this day, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than thyself, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom thou knowest, and of whom thou hast heard say, Who can stand before the sons of Anak? Know therefore this day, that Jehovah thy God is He who goeth over before thee as a devouring fire; He will destroy them, and He will bring them down before thee: so shalt thou drive them out, and make them to perish quickly, as Jehovah hath spoken unto thee. Speak not thou in thy heart, after that Jehovah thy God hath thrust them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness Jehovah hath brought me in to possess this land; whereas for the wickedness of these nations Jehovah doth drive them out from before thee. Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thy heart, dost thou go in to possess their land; but for the wickedness of these nations Jehovah thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that He may establish the word which Jehovah swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know therefore, that Jehovah thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiff-necked people. Remember, forget thou not, how thou provoked Jehovah thy God to wrath in the wilderness: from the day that thou went forth out of the land of Egypt, until ye came unto this place, ye have been rebellious against Jehovah” (Deuteronomy 9:1-7). So, God would not tell the remnant that they were

righteous, even though they were certainly purged of hundreds of thousands of the wicked rebels of the past.

Throughout the remainder of the history of God's relations with the children of Israel, He published clues to His future policy. He urged them to look for a *day*, called "Today," an opportunity to hear His voice again, and be warned against hardening their hearts, such as their fathers did (Psalm 95:7-11, Hebrews 3:7-4:13). He also predicted the change to a new covenant, one which would include only those who would keep His law in their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). He would even identify the Gentiles as the "people" to whom He would turn when He could no longer bear the rebellion of Israel (Isaiah 65:1-7, and compare Romans 9:22-24). In fact, the work He would give to the longed-for Messiah would be to save the Gentiles, as well as the Jews (Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:5-6).

When God came to the day that He no longer followed a policy of being a national God to Israel, He accepted into His kingdom only the "cream of the crop." In His "nation" there would no longer be only a minority of "heart-circumcised" people. Rather, He would win them first to that standard of character before he included them in His fold. It would be learned first by Peter that "in every nation he that fear Him, and works righteousness, is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:35). God sought men who were "ordained to eternal life" (Acts 13:48). They would be those who were susceptible to the "election of grace," whether Jew or Gentile (Romans 11:1-7). Finally, they would be all those who believed and confessed and called upon God (Romans 10:9-13).

Now, does God say He will retain in His favor those who are faithless or disloyal? No. He rejected the nation of Israel because of their unfaithfulness, but He warns those Gentiles who have taken their place that they must retain it by continuing faith (Romans 11:11-24). So, God now deals with individuals, instead of a nation. His standard is such as will include every soul that submits faithfully to His will. He will no longer bear the stiff-necked in His chosen people. The opportunity for salvation is universal, but the standard for the saved is high. The glory of being included in the Kingdom of God cannot be comprehended, until God reveals it fully by taking the redeemed of all nations into His eternal home. Yet, even the enticement of the inadequate descriptions of that glory are enough for those who "by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and incorruption."