

TO THE JEW FIRST!

True freedom for God's chosen people can only come from the gospel

by Charles Gardner

Earlier this year, when we marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I felt it was a good time to ponder the spiritual liberation that will truly set God's chosen people free. And it's worth recalling that it wasn't Moses who set them free from slavery in Egypt, but the blood of a lamb!

The merciless slaughter of six million Jews by one of the most advanced, 'civilised' nations on earth, should remind us of the depth of depravity of which man is capable. Any thoughts of his inherent goodness are surely shattered by the Nazis' ethnic cleansing that wiped out a third of worldwide Jewry.

The truth is that man is born with a corrupt, sinful nature which can only be rectified by the gospel: the sacrifice for sin of the Jewish Messiah that restores our relationship with the living God.

With this in mind, the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust is exacerbated by the negative effect it has had on Jewish evangelism. Christians, for the most part, have put Jewish mission on the back-burner, or ditched it altogether.

Because the common perception among many Jews today is still that they were sent to the gas chambers by 'Christian' nations (and there is undoubtedly some truth in this), it has understandably hardened their hearts against the message of hope they so desperately need. At the same time, 'the Church' at large has backed off, regarding Jewish mission as a 'no-go' area - whether out of guilt, wrong theology or a misunderstanding of history.

Some believe Jews forfeited their right as God's chosen people by their national rejection of Jesus and have thus been replaced by the church. Others believe Jews have their own covenant through which a right

standing with God can be obtained. But the gospel *“is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe; to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile”*. (Rom 1.16)

Denying the gospel to the Jews is the height of anti-Semitism because we are thus withholding the liberating message of their own Messiah from the very people for whom he came. (John 1.11)

Ensuring that the Shoah is never repeated is a noble pursuit, but our desire for the salvation of the Jews should be paramount, as it was for the Apostle Paul, who wrote: *“Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.”* (Rom 10.1) Yet in many churches, it is hard to find any evidence for such concern.

A lesson from history: Christian mission to the Jews was hugely successful in both the 19th and early 20th centuries. Records show that over 200,000 Jews became believers in Yeshua during the 19th century while various Jewish missions including CMJ reported that as many as 229,000 Jews had become followers of Jesus by the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Many of the latter would have perished in the concentration camps, though surely not without sharing the comfort of Messiah with their fellow sufferers.

Such a spiritual harvest was a direct result of the great evangelical awakening heralded by the likes of John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon and Bishop J C Ryle, all of whom made much of the vital need for Jewish evangelism in particular and for blessing the Jews in general.

This in turn had the world-changing knock-on effect of supporting Zionist aspirations which led to the British government’s Balfour Declaration of 1917 and ultimately to the re-birth of Israel as a nation in their ancient land.

Yet despite the slackening of evangelical focus on God’s chosen people along with the emotional obstacles of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust to which I have referred, we are now witnessing Jewish disciples of Jesus making an impact out of all proportion to their still relatively low numbers. As one of them told our 2017 tour group in Galilee, 90 percent of Jewish believers come to faith through the witness of Gentiles. So imagine what a harvest we could reap if we were all pulling our weight! It seems that the best way of spreading the gospel around the world is to make the Jews our priority, which is how it all began with Jesus himself.

The Apostle Paul, though called primarily to the Gentiles, practiced what he preached by first sharing the gospel message with the Jews in the various synagogues of his missionary journeys including Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. He wasn't always well received, but it's interesting to note that in Berea, where the Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica in that they *"received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"* (Acts 17.11f), there would seem to have been a rich harvest among both Jews and Gentiles! Would our gospel harvest be greater if we once more prioritised Jewish mission?

Cambridge-based Rev Charles Simeon, one of the leading evangelical figures of the 19th century, certainly believed so. The story goes that while preaching passionately of the Jews' future spiritual restoration ushering in a worldwide revival, he was passed a note by a friend, stating: *"Six million Jews and 600 million Gentiles – which is more important?"* (This was a reference to Jews representing 1% of the world's population at the time. The figure today is 0.1%) Simeon apparently scribbled back, *"If the conversion of the six is to be life from the dead of the 600, what then?"* (He was referring to Roman 11.15 where Paul asks: *"...If their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?"*). The Jews were the key, he was saying. The gospel is for the Jew first!

It's also a more powerful way of presenting the gospel – even to Gentiles! For example, I recently found myself engaged in deep conversation with two lady hairdressers (I was having my haircut) about Passover, and how it was fulfilled by Jesus dying on the cross. I have never felt such freedom in proclaiming the gospel.

Romans 1.16 is really an extension of one of the most fundamental truths in all the Bible – that if you bless the seed of Abraham, you will be blessed, but if you curse them, you will come under judgment (Gen 12.3). And there is no better way of blessing anyone than sharing the gospel with them. Besides, we owe it to them, as Paul also tells the Romans, though in the context of offering material help because we have shared in their spiritual blessings. (Rom 15.27) For they gave us the patriarchs, the prophets, the Scriptures – and Jesus himself!

In this respect, it's important to emphasise that there is not a dichotomy between the spiritual and political with regard to Israel. They are intertwined with each other. They have inherited both a land and everlasting love from the Lord! Why all the fuss over Israel? some Christians ask. Because Jesus has a special interest in their restoration – both physically and spiritually. He is looking to that time when the body and spirit come together as one, as it were. As individuals, we are born of the flesh, then of the Spirit (John 3.3). As a nation, Israel is restored to their land, and will then recognise Messiah and follow him (Ezekiel 36.24-26).

As with the confession of Nathanael at the start of Messiah's ministry – *"You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel"* – the second coming of Jesus also has a significance for both heaven (Son of God) and earth (King of Israel).

So why was it that the secular media (particularly the BBC) gave widespread coverage to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz while there was a deafening silence from the church in general? (Apart from the Christians of High Wycombe, who publicly confessed their mistreatment of Jews over the centuries).

Why does it take para-church organisations like Christian Friends of Israel to stand up for the truth? And why were Christians not dancing in the streets following last December's election – not over Brexit, but because we had somewhat miraculously been spared a Jew-hating, Marxist regime? If we Christians are not standing up for the Jews, there is something seriously wrong with our theology.

Almost four decades ago, the Lord gave me clear direction for an evangelistic project through Isaiah 52.7: *"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news..."* But it was only much more recently that I realised the context of that particular passage was over those who bring good news to Zion...to the Jewish people, telling them: *"Your God reigns!"*

I had the tremendous privilege of doing just that on my second visit to Israel in 2014 when I volunteered for an open mic performance at a nightspot called Mike's Place on the Jaffa Road in Jerusalem. The bar

manager lent me his guitar and I sang a couple of songs in front of a roomful of twenty-somethings, including *You raise me up*, effectively a worship song although not mentioning God by name. When I returned to my seat, a young Jewish man thanked me for my songs and asked, or rather declared: "*You were singing about Jesus, weren't you?*"

That sparked a long conversation about why I follow the Jewish Messiah, and why there was nothing to stop him doing the same. As it happens, his name was Moshe, translated *Moses* in English! I explained how, just as his ancestors were freed from slavery in Egypt by the blood of the lamb daubed on the lintels and doorposts of their houses, so the blood of Jesus gives us true freedom when we mark it on our hearts, as it were, in acknowledgement of our trust in its saving power. It was an awesome privilege to share how Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of Passover with a modern Moses!

So if you wish to make an impact on our troubled world, preach the gospel – to the Jew first if you can!