

# On Being a Chosen People

By David Chandler

Americans have a tendency to think of themselves as God's chosen people. We are firm believers in individual freedom and human rights. We have a well designed constitution, a stable government, vast resources, impressive technology, and a strong military. We pride ourselves in having saved the world from Hitler and see ourselves as the guardians of the "free world" against communism. We have been, and perhaps still are, the world's most prosperous nation, and it is easy to think of ourselves as the world's most moral nation too.

I would like to look for a few minutes at what it means to be a chosen people in light of the classic example: the ancient Israelites as presented in the Bible.

The ancient Israelites started out as slaves in Egypt. They saw their deliverance from Egypt as the direct action of God on their behalf. The book of Exodus tells of God appearing to Moses and through him saying to the slaves in Egypt:

"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgement, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God;..."

The Israelites entered into a covenant with God whereby they were to abide by certain ritual and ethical laws and give exclusive loyalty to the God who brought them out of Egypt. Thus, being chosen brought with it a set of obligations. Yet it was easy to slide into thinking simply that God was on their side, that they had an inside track with God, that they were better than other people. It was easy to feel that simply being an Israelite was sufficient to merit God's favor.

Israel's prophets denounced this self-serving attitude and called the people to a deeper understanding of what it meant to be chosen of God. Listen to the words of the prophet Amos, speaking for God:

"You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

Amos is affirming Israel's special covenant with God, but he insists that being chosen does not exempt Israel from God's judgement. Listen also to the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies--I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. ... When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

The sabbath and sacred feasts were prescribed in the law. These were part of what it meant to be an Israelite. But to Isaiah these rituals were meaningless apart from compassion and ethical conduct. The prophets saw that the true sign of a people called of God was a just society.

Israel's covenant with God was unique, but that did not mean God was any less concerned with the rest of the world. Israel needed to be reminded of this at times. Amos does this eloquently as he says:

"Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?" says the Lord. "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?..."

It sounds as if there have been many Exoduses! Perhaps it would be more accurate to say Israel was "a" chosen people rather than "the" chosen people. God is at work in more ways than we generally acknowledge.

Israel's sense of being chosen of God is no small thing. Look at the power of that idea. Israel's belief in its own special calling has enabled it to survive for thousands of years with its identity intact, even without a land of its own. It is an idea that is subject to easy abuse, but it also has a special power. A people with the sense of being special has the will to survive. Without a sense of your own specialness, you are nothing.

America has often been spoken of as the new Promised Land. Inscribed on the Statue of Liberty is a poem that ends,

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

We have our own patriarchs in George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. We have the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution with its Bill of Rights as "sacred" texts. The people who founded this country launched an experiment in the ideals of democracy and freedom applied to practical politics. Many really did believe that we as a people were called to a divine mission in the world.

I grew up thoroughly impressed with the ideals of America. For me they were what defined America. It never occurred to me that the reality of America might differ from what I read in the textbooks, except in minor ways. Then when I was in the eleventh grade I did a paper on the Spanish American War for a U.S. History class. I remember picking that topic when I became fascinated by an old dusty book in the library that looked like it had never been opened. In reading it I found a description of our role in Central America that our class text hardly hinted at. We came out looking not like a brother to the Latin American countries, but an arrogant bully. One example that stood out to me was the account of how we got access to Panama to build our canal there. Colombia owned the land that is now Panama and they didn't want us there. So we used our gunboats to help a revolutionary group split Panama off from the rest of Colombia. In other words, Panama was invented for our benefit. We even officially recognized the new revolutionary government 24 hours before they took over!

When I read this I was shocked. This was not what America was all about. My eyes were opened for the first time to the fact that America has not always acted according to its high ideals. That may sound naive, but I was naive. I thought America was special. I was proud of our ideals. I was not proud to see our willingness to roll over other nations to get what we wanted.

After that high school report I became more aware of other abuses of Americanism. Our treatment of the Indians was rationalized by the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny", the idea that we had a divine mandate to occupy the North American continent. We, like the ancient Israelites, used our belief that we were a chosen people to justify a genocidal war against the original inhabitants of the land. It was a revelation to me to drive through the Navajo reservation in Arizona last summer. Theirs is the largest tribe in America. Why? Because they are more prolific than the rest? No. They were allowed to survive simply because they occupy the most worthless land you can imagine. We weren't motivated to take it from them.

In Viet Nam we continued our war long past the point where anyone could see we had no business being there. Why? We have a myth that America doesn't lose wars. We are the "good guys". God is on our side. We poured unprecedented numbers of bombs on Indochina while we searched for a pretense of "peace with honor".

We claim we are protecting the world against Communist domination. I don't want to excuse the Soviets, but how free are we of attempts to dominate? We have 6% of the world's population but consume half the world's annual production of resources. Even in the worst of times we are far better off than many countries are on a normal basis. How far will we go to maintain our privileged position? What might we do if the name of "national interest" if our flow of energy or raw materials were cut off? How many little dictatorships will we prop up simply because they will do business with us and not rock the boat. Whatever happened to the "Spirit of 76" and the hatred of tyranny? How many refugees from El Salvador will we turn

away because we support the government that is committing atrocities against them?

The protest movements of the 60's grew out of a widespread perception that all we stood for as a nation was slipping away. The people involved were not anti-American. They were disillusioned Americans, and disillusionment can express itself in many ways.

We, as people, are no better than any other people anywhere. Thinking of ourselves as morally superior can blind us to our own faults and make us arrogant. And an arrogant person is a dangerous person. Look at the insanity of the arms race. Granted, it is a tough problem, but we perpetuate it as much as the Soviets. Wherever it leads, we must share responsibility. We could wind up destroying the earth in the name of fighting "Godless Communism". Despite our serious misgivings about Soviet morality, it is sobering to stop and realize that we are, after all, the only nation that has ever used a nuclear bomb on a human population.

Are we a chosen people? What would the prophets say to us if they were here today? If we are not somehow called of God, we are like a ship without a compass. What do we have to offer the world? Who are we?

I want to turn to one final passage in the Bible that gives the highest meaning to the idea of a chosen people. This is from the later chapters of Isaiah. Again, Isaiah is speaking for God.

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations."

This is from the first of a group of passages some have called the "Servant Songs". Some of these songs seem to refer to the Servant as an individual. Others refer to the Servant as the nation of Israel. The essential point for us is that to be "chosen" is to be a servant.

You are God's chosen person. You have a unique role in the world that only you can fill. Unless you see your life as special, unless you realize you are set apart by God for a life of service, your life will be hollow.

I believe we as a nation are a chosen people. If we lose that faith, we are nothing. We may not be the "best" nation or the most moral nation. We may not always be the most prosperous or most powerful nation. But we do have a heritage of some excellent ideals. Do we as a nation have the strength and the will to live by our best ideals and thereby serve all humanity? Or is the bottom line for us our short term self interest, at the expense of others and our own integrity? Will we come under the judgement of God as a self-serving nation with delusions of grandeur, or will God say of America, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights..."?