

THE GIFT THAT CHANGED THE PREACHER

By John L. Steely



You are standing in the door of your church saying goodbye to the folks after your Sunday sermon when a stranger shakes your hand, gives you a sealed envelope and walks on. As soon as you can, you go to your study to see what is in the envelope. A contribution? He would probably have put that in the collection plate. A prayer request? You open the envelope. It says: "Pastor, I challenge you to prepare and preach a sermon on two verses of the Bible, Acts 26: 6-7." "What!? Some kind of nut!" You've preached dozens, maybe a hundred sermons from the book of Acts in your thirty years in the ministry. Never a problem there. And you start to throw the note away. But you turn to the Book of Acts and read from the twenty-sixth chapter, verses six and seven, where the Apostle Paul is addressing King Agrippa.

"And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God to our fathers, Unto which promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews." "Ha!" you say. "What kind of sermon would that make?" And you begin to question the sanity of the stranger who gave you the note. But from force of habit you begin to analyze the verses. First, define and identify the terms-- 'St. Paul.' Easy enough. 'King Agrippa.' King Herod Agrippa II, according to your Bible Dictionary; son of King Herod Agrippa I. 'Our Twelve tribes.' Hmm. Wait a minute. Our twelve tribes! And little feelings--faint adumbrations--tiny fingers of fear begin to form in your chest.

"OUR TWELVE TRIBES!" These were descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, who was renamed Israel. They were Israelites! Hebrews! God's Chosen Race! But most of them disappeared 750 years ago, following the Assyrian deportations! The Lost Ten Tribes! Yet, Paul says they are still in existence! "What?" And, the 'Jews'...Panic now. Full blown fear. THE JEWS...They are NOT part of the twelve tribes! Which means the members of the twelve tribes are NOT Jews...and the Jews are NOT Israelites!

"Help me, help me! I don't want to know all this! If I preach this, I'll lose my job. I'll be run out of the Church. I've taught for years that the Jews are the chosen race. I can't admit this. It can't be true! I'll check it out." You calm down somewhat, and begin a more careful exegesis, hoping, oh, hoping, to prove your discovery wrong, and hoping that the stranger was really a nut. You are getting sick. But you think of the first epistle of James, which the brother of Christ addressed 'to the twelve tribes scattered abroad.' You check the date. It was written before Titus sacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and so was Acts 26:6-7. No help! No help! You remember that Christ rejected the Jews. 'You are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice and follow me.'

You are getting sick. You recall that Jesus told his disciples to 'go to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.' "Oh, why didn't they straighten this out in the seminary?" So, what was the House of Israel? You remember. The Northern Kingdom. That's right. After King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam caused the nation of Israel-- the twelve tribes-- to split into two nations. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin and some Levites became the 'House of Judah,' the Southern Kingdom, with Jerusalem as its Capital. And the other tribes went North and formed the 'House of Israel,' with Samaria as its Capital. You remember that there were actually thirteen tribes because the inheritance of Jacob's son, Joseph, was divided between his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

You look at the clock. You have to go home for lunch and rest up for the evening service. You hope it isn't unChristian to curse the stranger with the crazy note. But your mind won't quit. Somehow you know that your whole life has changed--in the twinkling of an eye! You turn to the Old Testament. What happened to the tribes? You read again from Chapters 17, 18 and 19 of the Second Book of Kings that as the result of a series of assaults by Assyrian Kings, not only the tribes of the Northern Kingdom were forcibly relocated South of the Caucasus Mountains 'in Halah and Habor by the river of Gozan and the cities of the Medes,' but members of the Southern tribes were taken also. '...Sennacherib, King of

Assyria, came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them.' (2K 18:13)...Only Jerusalem, Judah's capital was spared. (2 K 19:32-34)

"But, wait a minute. Don't they say that 150 or so years later that the Southern Kingdom was taken captive to Babylon and the remnant that returned to rebuild Jerusalem seventy years after that included all the tribes?" In desperation you check. No luck. Ezra 1:5 and 4:1 specifically mention that tribes of Judah and Benjamin came back from Babylon. The Bible checks out. You are dead! Members of all twelve tribes were scattered abroad. But you look and look. You can't give up. "Wasn't Moses a Jew?" The Bible doesn't say so. You were sure it did. "The Book of Revelation--the 144,000?" They are all of the tribes of Israel, but the Bible doesn't call them Jews. It was you who called them that. You find that the word 'Jew' appears for the first time in 2 K 16:6, where the 'Jews' of the Southern Kingdom are fighting the Israelites in the North.

You look the word up in the Concordance. It should have been translated 'Judean' or 'Judahite.' It meant a member of the tribe of Judah or a citizen of the Kingdom of Judea. The word was never applied to the Northern Kingdom. "Why didn't my professors tell me that?" You remember that the birthright promises of a great nation and a company of nations were transmitted by Jacob to Ephraim and Manasseh. You begin to think. "How could these promises -- the very promises which Paul and the twelve tribes were hoping for -- possibly be fulfilled by Ephraim and Manasseh, who were transported by the Assyrians, if they became extinct? These promises were never fulfilled by the Jews. Why did I never see that?"

You are still sick. You are getting deeper. By now you know that your teachers were ignorant or deliberately lied. You read aloud from the Book of Hosea. It talks about the captured Israelites. "I will say to them who were not my people, 'Thou art my people'; and they shall say, 'Thou art my God,' and they shall no more be remembered by their name." Ah! They will have a new name. Not 'Jew,' not 'Hebrew...', not 'Israelite' - Christian! You read the 9th, 10th and 11th chapters of the Book of Romans. They now make sense. Paul is talking about the cast off, punished tribes of the House of Israel. 'Thus will all Israel be saved.' "Of course, of course!"

You see Hebrews 8:10. The New Covenant. 'For this is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.' Paul was quoting Jer. 31:31-37.

Christians! Not the Jews, who in two thousand years have not heard His voice and followed Him, because THEY ARE NOT HIS SHEEP!

But who are these Christian--the true Israelites--the Chosen Race of God? Where are they today? You know who they are. You are almost paralyzed from fear of the truth; but you know who they are. You go home, eat a few bites and try to sleep. In a few days you receive an anonymous gift. It is a book. "Judah's Sceptre and Joseph's Birthright," by Bishop James Allen (1906). You learn that God's people migrated, tribe by tribe, out of the Caucasus where the Assyrians had placed them; the very people who are now called Caucasians.

You learn that the Holy Bible is the story of one Race; that it is Christian from beginning to end; and, for the first time in your life you are beginning to understand it. You pray. A voice in your mind says, 'Do not fear. Put on my armor. Feed my sheep. Tell my people the truth.' And slowly, reluctantly, but with courageous resolve, you prepare a sermon on verses six and seven of the twenty-sixth chapter of the Book of Acts.