

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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FORGOTTEN LOVE

The story of the American Colony in Jerusalem and what it teaches about God's love for Israel and our salvation

by Galen Peterson

In 1861 Horatio and Anna Spafford settled on the North Side of Chicago, where they helped to build a church. Ten years later they had acquired a significant amount of real estate, but then lost nearly all of it to the Great Chicago Fire that destroyed much of the city. They spent two years assisting others with the recovery and providing a place to stay for many of the new homeless people of Chicago.

Needing a break, they made plans to spend some time traveling in Europe. Anna went ahead with their four daughters while Horatio completed some last minute business before joining them. But en route to France the steamer *Ville du Havre* accidentally collided with an iron sailing vessel and sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Newfoundland. Anna was among the few who survived and was rescued. But their four daughters, ages two to eleven, were among the 230 who perished.

Upon hearing the news Horatio immediately departed for

France to be with his wife. When his ship reached the spot where the ship had sunk, he was called to the bridge of the vessel and was informed of that fact. Horatio returned to his cabin where he took out a sheet of paper and penned the words to this hymn:

*"When peace, like a river,
attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught
me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul."*

Horatio and Anna returned back home to Chicago and rebuilt their family with two more children—a son, Horatio Jr. and a daughter, Bertha—only to be struck by tragedy once again when little Horatio died of scarlet fever at the age of three. The leaders of their church took the position that these deaths were divine retribution for sin in their lives. After an extended controversy they were forced out of the church that they had helped to build.

They soon learned that others had experienced similar tragedies

and they all banded together in support of one another. They decided that the best place for all of them was in the city of Jerusalem.

So in 1881, in an act of great faith, thirteen adults and three children made their way to Jerusalem. They settled inside the walls of the Old City, where they rented a building. They held daily meetings with worship and Bible study, that attracted local Jews and Arabs who came and listened.

They became known as the American Colony. As their leader, Horatio believed that they should simply live among the people, modeling Christian behavior, while waiting for the Second Coming of Messiah. A group from the colony would go to the Mt. of Olives every day with tea and cakes with the hope of being there to greet Jesus at His return. They also did acts of charity in the city.

In 1882 the colony provided a large number of impoverished Jews from Yemen with food, tents and other material goods when the existing Ashkenazi and Sephardic

communities refused to do so. Over time they became appreciated by both their Jewish and Arab neighbors.

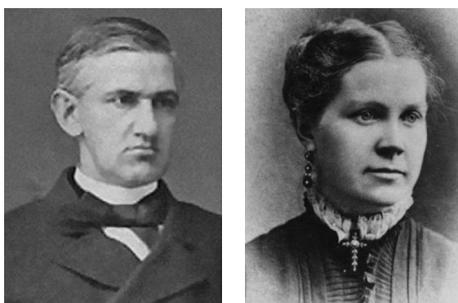
Then in 1888 Horatio died from Malaria. His wife Anna became the leader of the colony, adopting the title of Mother Spafford. And although she had some quirky spiritual practices and a strong-willed character, the group grew considerably under her leadership. In 1896 a group of over 70 Swedish Americans from Chicago and another 40 people from Sweden joined the colony, bringing the total number of members to about 150. So it is a bit odd, but the majority of the members of the *American Colony* were *Swedish*. One of the Swedes from Chicago explained that they made the commitment to come because, “We wished to go there when God brought the Jews back. We wanted to see the prophecies fulfilled.”

At that time they moved to a new location outside the city walls. The colony started a hostel there that would eventually become the American Colony Hotel. But the biggest change came from the increased numbers of Swedes who brought a variety of trade skills. They started a farm and a dairy, a butcher’s shop, a bakery, carpenter’s shop and furniture store, medical clinic, and a photography studio.

Jerusalem and the surrounding lands were all part of the Ottoman Empire at that time, which was 80% Muslim. That meant that *sharia* was the supreme law of the land, and non-Muslims like Jews and Christians had *dhimmi* status that allowed religious freedom but were treated as second-class citizens.

During WW1, the Ottoman Empire became an ally of Germany. So the British, under

general Allenby, responded by attacking their forces. When the battle raged around Jerusalem, refugees poured into the city and the American Colony began providing medical care, as well as starting an orphanage for children who lost parents in the war, and a soup kitchen that fed up to 2,700 people a day. After the war, the Ottoman Empire was broken up and Jerusalem became part of the British Mandate that controlled the region until 1948.



Horatio and Anna Spafford

In 1923 Anna Spafford died after leading the colony on her own for 35 years. Divisions emerged within the colony regarding its direction. Some people left the colony, but others stayed. Leadership of colony was turned over to the founders’ daughter, Bertha, who had married Frederick Vester.

Bertha did not share her parents’ interest in the fulfillment of end-times prophecy, including the return of the Jewish people to the land of their forefathers. She was particularly interested in the Adwan Bedouin tribe on the eastern side of the Jordan River where she had been welcomed earlier as a child and began a lifelong friendship.

Meanwhile, her husband Frederick solidified the business aspect of the colony, making it profitable. This enabled the colony to start the Spafford Baby Home in

1926, serving Arab children, which developed into a children’s hospital.

By the mid-1930’s, the American Colony was no longer a spiritually-based community, but a family business with a humanitarian dimension. All of the remaining members who held a Christian vision and purpose for the colony moved away.

Bertha Spafford Vester continued her involvement at the hospital until she died in 1968. And all that remains today is the world-class American Colony Hotel and the Spafford Children’s Center, which provides a variety of social services besides medical care. According to their website:

“While we offer help to anyone in need, regardless of race, religion or cultural background, it is currently the Palestinians who have the greatest need.”

The story of the American Colony is an example of forgotten love. From Horatio to Anna to Bertha to incorporation, there was a slow, but steady transformation from people with a focus on Jesus and God’s revealed plan involving the Jewish people, to an emphasis on humanitarian needs for *all* people, and finally to a blending of a financially-driven business model with social welfare that *excluded* the Jewish people.

In many ways, this story illustrates a trend that has been repeated many times. In recent decades we have witnessed within the church a transformation from understanding God’s plan for the Jewish people as described in Scripture, and a genuine heart for Israel, to widespread indifference, and then advocacy that leaves out the Jewish people, and in some cases, outright hostility. It is the classic example of a slow change

over time, like the frog in the kettle, in which you aren't even aware of the change that is taking place. And it is a slippery slope that, once it begins, often descends into the abyss of self-righteous hatred.

But in order to take that slide, one must ignore forthright declarations from the sovereign Lord of the universe:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and Zion'"
(Zech. 1:14)

"I have loved you (Israel) with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness" (Jer. 31:3).

It is clear from the words of God that He loves Israel and the habitation of Zion in Jerusalem. Notice that He said: "I have loved you with אהבת עולם (*ahavat olam*)—an everlasting love." God is not like us. And His love for the Jewish people is not like the love of human beings who are fickle and capable of being deceived and thus prone to reject and to change their mind. His love is incapable of being interrupted or defeated—it never ends.

Notice also that God is the one doing the drawing or the directing. And the context of Jeremiah 31 shows that *He* is the driving force behind Zionism.

"I will build you" (v. 4).

"I am bringing them from the north country, and I will gather them from the remote parts of the earth" (v. 8).

"I will lead them; I will make them walk by streams of waters" (v. 9).

"He who scattered Israel will gather him and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock" (v 10)

Do you see the picture here? From the human perspective, the return of the Jewish people to the land of their forefathers appears to be driven by their own initiative, including their desire to dwell in the land, and the political movements like the First Zionist Conference in 1897 and the Balfour Declaration in 1917. But those are just manifestations of the way that God has worked within history. The Bible makes it very clear that He is the one that has brought the Jewish people back to the land.

For those who embrace God's declarations in this regard, there are great blessings in store:

"Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away" (Is. 51:11 KJV).

This verse was literally fulfilled with the return of the Jewish people to the land. But it also applies to everyone who is redeemed of the Lord. The word translated as redeemed has the sense of being rescued or delivered from slavery. But it is also visually depicted in the rescue of Anna Spafford in the Atlantic Ocean. Her redemption came when a ship picked her up while she was holding on to debris after the shipwreck.

When we sin against God, our lives become wrecked in a spiritual sense. But God, in His mercy rescues or redeems us from our plight when we believe in Jesus as Messiah and Savior. In this metaphor, Jesus is our life preserver that is tossed toward us. We just have to grab it and hold on while we get pulled into safety.

We all can share in this great

blessing of spiritual redemption because believing Gentiles, including Arabs and Swedes, are grafted in to the olive tree of Israel, and thus share in God's blessings (Rom 11:17). But for those who reject what God has declared, there is a real problem:

"Do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you." (Rom. 11:18)

"May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward" (Ps. 129:5).

This is the shame that comes with forgetting God's love for Zion and the Jewish people. And we are witnessing that act of forgetting increasingly today. The popular claim frequently expressed is: "I'm not anti-Semitic, I'm just against Zionism."

Martin Luther King Jr. understood very well the way that words can be twisted yet still reveal what lies within the heart. Shortly before his assassination in 1968, he astutely reminded us, "When people criticize Zionists they mean Jews, you are talking anti-Semitism."

Those are very strong words. But we need only look at our world today to observe beliefs and opinions that demonstrate the slippery slope of forgetting God's everlasting love of Zion and the Jewish people.

It is also interesting to note the same voices opposing Israel often ignore the Gospel. There are many books that promote issues of justice and social action and condemnation of Israel. And at the same time they have virtually nothing to say about salvation by grace through faith in Messiah Jesus. Affirmations of the Good

News, it seems, are slipping away at the same time.

Why is that so? We know that the spirit of anti-Christ is already in the world. That is a spirit that opposes the person and works of Jesus. And this world is a spiritual battleground because the message of salvation is always going to be opposed by the Adversary who also opposes the people of Israel. It's all about the coupling of God's promises to Israel and to everyone regarding salvation.

These linked promises are found in the 31st chapter of Jeremiah:

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (vv. 33-34)

Just as God restores the Jewish people back to the land of Israel, He restores everlasting life back to sinners. This is the promise of perfected salvation. It is not superficial in nature, like the Law written on tablets of stone and parchment. It is written on our hearts, a truly spiritual transformation. And we know that this promise was fulfilled in the atoning death of Jesus (Lk. 22:20). But here is the part that people on the slippery slope consistently fail to acknowledge:

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; the LORD of hosts is His name: "If this fixed order departs from before Me," declares the LORD, "Then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever." (vv. 35-36)

This means the universe as we know it must cease to exist before God will cast off or reject the Jewish people. That is because this commitment is based on His everlasting love. Yet many people have forgotten that fact. And they have either forgotten or never knew that our promise of salvation through Jesus as established in the New Covenant is linked to God's preservation of the people of Israel. Both promises are as good as the sun and the moon and the stars shining in the sky and the waves crashing on the sea.

Moreover, the parallels of forgetting God's love for Zion and the Jewish people and forgetting your first love of Jesus are remarkable, for often those who are opposed to Israel tend to make social concerns the highest priority over proclaiming the Gospel. In the case of the American Colony in Jerusalem, the people

eventually forgot the love of the Lord held by their founders, and focused only on loving their neighbors. How easy it is to go from the Gospel of Jesus to the social Gospel to no Gospel at all. Jesus is telling everyone who is forgetting our first love, it is time to repent and embrace Him or to face grave consequences.

A wise man or woman will constantly check him or herself against what is known to be true. We need to check what is being taught to us against the Word of God. We need to test our own thoughts, like David who called out to God, "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (Ps 139:23). We need to seek out the wisdom of those who have been there and done that, and know why it is so.

I am convinced that we are very capable of remaining true to the Word of God regarding His promises to Israel and His great work of salvation. And, in so doing, we can remain faithful to our first love of the Lord without failing in our calling to love our neighbors as well.

This is the message that our ministry is seeking to communicate to Jewish and Gentile people alike. May we all know and remember the truth of God's Word and gain discernment from the times when others fail to do so.

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