

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 1 – Hezekiah: God is my strength
2Chronicles 29-32; 2Kings 18-20; Isaiah 36-37

Introduction

After Solomon's reign (970-939 B.C.), the nation of Israel was divided into two opposing kingdoms, north (Israel) and south (Judah). The Southern Kingdom, centered in Jerusalem, was loyal to the dynasty of king David. The Northern Kingdom was completely apostate, having non-Davidic kings and being immersed in idolatry and false religion for its entire 200-year history. As a judgment from God, the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians (722 B.C.) and was taken into captivity (2Kings 17).

The Southern Kingdom had both good and bad kings. As a result, God preserved Judah for an additional 136 years until the Southern Kingdom was taken into Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. During these additional 136 years, Judah had two great kings: Hezekiah and Josiah. We will focus on these two "reformer kings" who tried to call the people back to covenant loyalty with Yahweh. We will also focus the remainder of our O.T. survey on the writing prophets whom God raised up to speak to the nation before, during, and after the Babylonian captivity (Isaiah – Malachi).

To understand the life of **Hezekiah**, it is important to see the great challenges he faced as a king. Hezekiah came to power at a tumultuous time in the Southern Kingdom. There were three major challenges.

1. Spiritual apostasy. Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, was very wicked, reigning for 16 years. Ahaz's solution for national distress was to cry out to the king of Assyria for help in defeating Judah's enemies. At Ahaz's request, Assyria invaded destroying the Syrians and capturing their capitol city of Damascus (2Kings 16:7-9). In return for this help against the Syrian-Israel coalition, Ahaz made Judah a vassal state subject to Assyria. When Ahaz went to meet the Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser, in Damascus of Syria, he saw a beautiful altar devoted to a pagan idol. He sent a drawing of

the altar back to Uriah the priest in Jerusalem (note: this was an altar devoted to a now defeated god!). A copy was made before Ahaz returned to Jerusalem. Then, Ahaz proceeded to revise the entire worship system of Judah, in keeping with his own desires. He shut down the temple of Yahweh and practiced idolatry, even sacrificing some of his own sons in fire to false gods (2Chronicles 28:3). Thus, Judah was spiritually apostate in the decades just prior to Hezekiah's kingship.

2. Israel/Syria coalition. During the reign of Ahaz, Syria and Israel (Northern Kingdom) formed a coalition. They attacked and *severely* defeated Judah, killing 120,000 in one day and taking 200,000 women, sons and daughters captive (2Chronicles 28:5-15). The military and socio-economic strength of Judah was at a low point during Ahaz's 16-year reign.

3. The Assyrian threat. The Assyrians, the dominant world power, had already begun to make incursions into the Northern Kingdom in the 50 years prior to Hezekiah's reign. The Assyrians were known for their cruelty against any enemy that failed to surrender immediately. Shortly after Hezekiah took the throne from Ahaz, the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom and besieged Samaria for 3 years, finally taking Israel into captivity.

In short – Hezekiah inherited a kingdom in crisis. Now we can appreciate the significance of his name. **Hezekiah** means “God is my strength.” He was just 25 years old when he took the throne from his father Ahaz. His early moves show that he was, in fact, determined to live out the meaning of his name.

Move #1 – Return to God: 2Chronicles 29-31

Hezekiah's first few years were dedicated to spiritually reforming Judah and calling the nation back to the true worship of Yahweh. He wasted no time initiating and prioritizing spiritual reforms.

“In the first month of the first year of his reign, he opened the doors of the temple of the LORD and repaired them” (2Chr. 29:3).

He knew that the previous generation had suffered because they had departed from the Lord. He said to the people:

“Our parents were unfaithful; they did evil in the eyes of the LORD our God and forsook him. They turned their faces away from the LORD's dwelling place and turned their backs on him” (2Chr. 29:6).

Once he had reconstructed the temple, he had a massive service rededicating the temple and its servants to the service of the Lord.

“So the service of the temple of the LORD was reestablished. Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced at what God had brought about for his people, because it was done so quickly” (2Chr. 29:35,36).

Often, we know in our hearts when God wants us to change something in our lives, or to take some specific action. We hear a message, read a passage, or feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit . . . but then we procrastinate in making the change. When we do this, we end up spending precious days living outside of the will of God for our lives. Hezekiah reminds us of the importance of swift obedience. Are there any areas of your life where God has been calling out to you to make a change? If you write down what God is saying to you, and share this with a friend, they can not only pray for you but also hold you accountable to take whatever next step you need to take. “As the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts . . .’” (Hebrews 3:7).

Move #2 – The Great Passover: 2Chronicles 30

Hezekiah’s next act was to invite *all of Israel in the Northern Kingdom* to come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival with the people of the Southern Kingdom.

“Hezekiah ... sent a proclamation throughout Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, calling the people to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel. It had not been celebrated in large numbers according to what was written” (2Chr. 30:1,5).

The Passover had been neglected for years due to apostasy. This was Hezekiah’s attempt to bring north and south together in repentance and renewal, especially in light of the ongoing Assyrian threat. Sadly, most of the northerners missed the significance of this moment in their history.

“The couriers went from town to town in Ephraim and Manasseh, as far as Zebulun, but people scorned and ridiculed them. Nevertheless, some from Asher, Manasseh and Zebulun humbled themselves and went to Jerusalem” (2Chr. 30:10,11).

We are not responsible for the results when we take the initiative to invite people to come back to God. We are responsible to take the initiative . . . and Hezekiah did that. He was a faithful witness, even though a lot of people laughed at his message. On the other hand, many were rejoicing over the reforms led by Hezekiah.

“The entire assembly of Judah rejoiced, along with the priests and Levites and all who had assembled from Israel, including the foreigners who had come from Israel and also those who resided in Judah. There was great joy in Jerusalem, for since the days of Solomon son of David king of Israel there had been nothing like this in Jerusalem. The priests and the Levites stood to bless the people, and God heard them, for their prayer reached heaven, his holy dwelling place” (2Chr. 30:25-27).

Note: While Hezekiah was sharpening hearts for God, the Assyrians were sharpening their swords for war. Some could have said: “You’re wasting time with all these spiritual reforms. This money could have been spent building our war machine, our defenses, or coming up with new ways to resist the Assyrian machine.” Hezekiah focused his efforts on seeking God, because he truly believe that *God was his strength* (and the strong protector of the nation).

Maybe you have felt a bit like Hezekiah – you have been inviting someone to come to church, or to a study group, or to a class . . . but they have been refusing your invitations. Remember – it is our job to reach out to others with grace and love, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, we must leave the results to God. We can only be responsible for our own motives and actions. We cannot decide for others. Yet, even if your invitations have been refused or ignored, you can still pray for people, that God would soften their hearts and show them their need for Him.

Move #3 – Securing the reforms: 2Chronicles 31

Hezekiah was diligent to ensure that this spiritual reform was not a short-lived event; but an ongoing movement – that the worship of Yahweh was well supported and would continue, according to the laws of Moses. Notice how *active* he was in making sure that these reforms would be long-lasting:

- ***Hezekiah assigned the priests and Levites to divisions . . .***
- ***Hezekiah contributed from his own possessions for the morning and evening burnt offerings and for the burnt offerings on the***

Sabbaths, at the New Moons and at the appointed festivals as written in the Law of the LORD.

- Hezekiah ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the LORD.

- When Hezekiah and his officials came and saw the heaps of offerings, they praised the LORD and blessed his people Israel.

- Hezekiah gave orders to prepare storerooms in the temple of the LORD, and this was done.

The summary of his reform movement highlights his diligence:

“This is what Hezekiah did throughout Judah, doing what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. In everything that he undertook in the service of God’s temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. So he prospered” (2Chr. 31:20,21).

Hezekiah defined true leadership for us. He sought God and moved decisively in a time of great crisis. He was thorough and thoughtful as he considered the times and took action. Is there some area of your life where God is inviting you to step up and lead with the strength and determination of Hezekiah? Take some time to sit in his story and be encouraged. Like this great king, you can make a difference in your world IF God is your strength and you move decisively in His strength.

Move #4 – Breaking ranks with Assyria: 2Kings 18

Hezekiah’s father, Ahaz, had made Judah subject to Assyria in hopes of being protected by Assyria, instead of being attacked. Hezekiah immediately decided to overturn that protection alliance. His strength was in God, not in Assyria.

“Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not stop following him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. From watchtower to fortified city, he defeated the Philistines, as far as Gaza and its territory” (2Kings 18:5-8).

Now that we have seen how Hezekiah leaned *into the Lord for his strength*, we can survey the subsequent threats that came to him.

Threat #1 - Years 4-6: Assyria destroys Israel: 2Kings 17

It was in years 4-6 of Hezekiah's reign that the Northern Kingdom of Israel met its end. Israel was invaded by Shalmaneser and the Assyrians, and the entire population was taken captive.

“The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria” (2Kgs.17:5,6).

The Assyrian practice was to intermingle captives from various nations, to destroy the blood lines from each nation (to ‘erase’ national identity). Thus, the Northern Kingdom Israelites were forced to intermingle and intermarry with other nations/races.

Note: Many of these intermingled Jewish people were resettled in the former capital of Israel, Samaria. Over the centuries that followed, they became known as “the Samaritans,” half-blooded Jews that were hated by the pure-blooded Jews. In the time of Jesus, we see many touchpoints with these hated Samaritans. Most notably, we find Jesus not only interacting with them, but also offering the gift of salvation to them, just as He did with the pure-blooded Jews that lived around the Samaritans. Jesus even told one famous parable where a Samaritan was the hero - the parable of the “Good Samaritan!”

Hezekiah led the South with a steady hand as they witnessed the slow, 3-year death of the North. The divine protection over the Southern Kingdom was due to Hezekiah's strong spiritual reforms.

Threat #2 - Year 14: Assyria attacks Judah: 2Kings 18

Hezekiah's biggest challenge came in his 14th year, when Sennacherib king of Assyria sought to capture Judah. At first, Hezekiah sought to ward off this invasion by retracting his earlier denial of the vassal relationship with Assyria, and paying tribute to the Assyrians. *This was one point in Hezekiah's life where he resorted to the wrong strategy to find protection.*

So Hezekiah king of Judah sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: “I have done wrong. Withdraw from me, and I will pay whatever you demand of me.” The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the temple of the LORD and in the

treasuries of the royal palace. At this time Hezekiah king of Judah stripped off the gold with which he had covered the doors and doorposts of the temple of the LORD, and gave it to the king of Assyria (2Kings 18:14-16).

These O.T. kings were human. Even Hezekiah had days where he wavered in faith and decided it would be better to sell off God's assets to buy some mercy from Assyria. But it didn't work.

Sennacherib was not satisfied. He sent his army to destroy Hezekiah and Jerusalem. Sennacherib sent one of his chief princes, Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem with a large army to demand immediate surrender from Hezekiah. Standing outside the walls of the city, Rabshakeh made one of the most defiant speeches ever made, against the people and the God of Israel.

Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, "Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you from my hand. Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own—a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death! Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (2Kings 18:28-35).

Imagine being Hezekiah in this situation. He would have to make decisions that would impact the fate of all the people depending upon him. Should he surrender to the Assyrians and hope for mercy from Sennacherib? Or, should he call the nation to depend upon Yahweh and hope for protection from on high? Indeed, the stakes were very high.

When Hezekiah heard this ultimatum from Assyria, he did two things – he prayed and he asked for a word from God.

“When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD. He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz” (19:1,2).

To tear one’s clothes and put on sackcloth was a sign of deep repentance and dependence upon the Lord. Hezekiah went into the temple of the Lord to seek God’s face in this hour of crisis. Then, he sent messengers to inquire of **Isaiah the prophet**, to see if there might be a revelation from God as to what he should do.

Sure enough, Isaiah heard from God and gave a word of reassurance to Hezekiah:

When King Hezekiah’s officials came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, “Tell your master, ‘This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Listen! When he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword’” (2Kings 19:5-7).

As Isaiah foresaw, Rabshakeh was forced to depart from Jerusalem because he was called to assist Sennacherib in another pressing battle. Yet, the crisis was far from over for Hezekiah.

Threat #3 - The letter from Sennacherib: 2Kings 19

When the Assyrians departed, this gave Hezekiah time to gather himself, consult advisors, and make a plan. But his time to ponder was interrupted by a letter. When Rabshakeh reported to Sennacherib that Hezekiah had not surrendered, Sennacherib sent a letter back to Hezekiah warning that the Assyrians would soon return and that the Jews must be prepared to surrender quickly and quietly next time, or meet a cruel death.

This was another moment of truth for king Hezekiah. Would he call to Egypt for help? Would he seek to buy forgiveness from Assyria with more tribute money? Or, would he act in keeping with his name believing that *God was his strength*?

The defining moment came when Hezekiah took the threatening letter from Sennacherib and spread it out before the Lord in prayer:

Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: "LORD, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God. It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone, LORD, are God" (2Kings 19:14-19).

In response to Hezekiah's prayer of dependence, Isaiah the prophet came with a second word from Lord concerning God's protection over Hezekiah and the people of Judah.

"Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria: 'He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city, declares the LORD. I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant'" (2Kings 19:32-34).

That same night, the angel of the Lord sent a wasting disease among the Assyrian camp and 185,000 warriors perished, just outside the walls of Jerusalem! This was the high point of Hezekiah's life, showing that as was his name, so was his experience: God is my strength.

What a great picture of how we should handle life's greatest threats and problems. We should "lay the letter out before the Lord." Is there some "threatening news" that you need to lay before the Lord today? Are you trying to solve the problem in your own strength? Or, are you inviting God to be your strength? I would encourage you to do what Peter said: "Cast ALL your anxieties upon Him, because He cares for you" (1Peter 5:7). Once you have "laid the letter out before the Lord," you can trust Him to bring about the result that will best bring honor and glory to His name. As Paul wrote concerning his trials with the Roman authorities: "Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death" (Philippians 1:20).

Note: Archaeology has provided us with more details on the military campaigns of Sennacherib. The Sennacherib Stone was discovered in 1830 among the ruins of ancient Nineveh. It is a large stone with 6 sides on which are inscribed some 500 lines of text where Sennacherib boasts of 8 military campaigns, including his siege of Jerusalem. While Sennacherib boasts mightily of his many conquests, it is fascinating to see what he wrote about Hezekiah – that the king of Judah “would not submit to my yoke,” and that “I had him trapped like a caged bird in Jerusalem, his royal city.” He boasts that Hezekiah was forced to pay tribute to him, but he never boasts of actually capturing Jerusalem. Indeed, Sennacherib did have Hezekiah trapped like a caged bird . . . but the part that he did not care to write about what how “the bird escaped” by the hand of the Lord in one night!



Threat #4 – Mortal illness: 2Kings 20

Hezekiah became king at age 25. He overcame the Assyrian invasion in his 14th year, at age 39. Then, shortly after escaping the Assyrian threat, he became mortally ill. Here we find him again calling out to God to be his strength and healer.

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, “This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.” Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, “Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly (2Kgs. 20:1-3).

When he cried out to God, the Lord graciously intervened, giving him a miraculous sign *and* an additional 15 years of life.

Threat #5 – Pride: 2Chronicles 32

Yet, something was not right in Hezekiah's heart. The parallel account in 2Chronicles gives us insight into his heart-condition:

“In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the LORD, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come on them during the days of Hezekiah” (2Chronicles 32:24-26).

He did not respond properly to God. There was some form of pride in his heart over his miraculous healing (or perhaps over his own sense of self-importance). Or, perhaps the pride had begun to take root in Hezekiah's heart after the great deliverance from the Assyrians. We find this short note in 2Chronicles just after the story of the deliverance from Sennacherib's army:

“Many brought offerings to Jerusalem for the LORD and valuable gifts for Hezekiah king of Judah. From then on he was highly regarded by all the nations” (2Chronicles 32:23).

Whether it was the victory over Sennacherib, his miraculous healing, or the way he was being lauded by all nations . . . *pride gained a foothold in Hezekiah's life in year 14 (age 39).*

There is further evidence of his fall into pride. When the *king of Babylon* heard of Hezekiah's illness, he sent an envoy with gifts and good wishes. Hezekiah used the opportunity to try to impress the Babylonian envoy with a show of his wealth and strength.

“Hezekiah received the envoys and showed them all that was in his storehouses—the silver, the gold, the spices and the fine olive oil—his armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them” (2Kings 20:13).

Isaiah the prophet came to Hezekiah with a word of judgment from the Lord. Because of this display of pride, God would eventually send *the Babylonians* to capture those very treasures and take Judah into captivity (this would occur in 586 B.C.). The Babylonians did succeed the Assyrians as the dominant world-power about a century later.

The encouraging note is that, when confronted with his pride, Hezekiah repented so that the wrath of God did not fall upon him and Judah/Jerusalem during the remainder of his lifetime.

Why is it that so many of the O.T. kings fell to the sin of PRIDE late in their lives? This is a sin that we must guard against! It seems that there is this innate human desire to look back over “our victories” and to find some measure of “self-worth” in them . . . when in fact all “our victories” were granted to us by GOD! They were really “His victories” that He graciously allowed us to be a part of, during our lifetime. Let us all be careful about this sin of pride. Who are you giving the credit to for the great things that have happened in your life?

Hezekiah truly was one of the greatest kings of the Old Testament. His reforms brought an extension of life for the Kingdom of Judah. His prayers saved Judah from certain death at the hands of the Assyrians. His prayers also caused God to give him an extension of physical life. He was not perfect; but he was noble, and the Scriptures hold him up as a leader we should emulate.

Discussion Questions

1. Hezekiah initiated quick and thorough spiritual reforms as the foundation for his reign as king. How does he motivate you to reform some things in your life?
2. Hezekiah faced his greatest threat from Sennacherib, king of Assyria, especially when the letter arrived. What is the “great threat” in your life at this time?
3. Hezekiah took the letter from Sennacherib and laid it out before the Lord in fervent prayer. What would it look like for you to do the same with the thing(s) that are threatening you?
4. Hezekiah fell to the sin of pride. What impact has this part of his story had on your life? Are there any specific areas that come to mind where you might be (or are) tempted to fall into the sin of pride?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 2 – Isaiah: His Calling and Message to Judah
Isaiah 1-39

Introduction

Isaiah has been called “the prince of the prophets.” His book was placed first in the Jewish collection of prophets because of the scope and significance of his prophecies. His prophecies are quoted more frequently than any other in the New Testament. His name means “Yahweh Saves;” or “Yahweh is Salvation”. He ministered during the reigns of four Southern Kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Uzziah reigned with zeal for God until the end, but he contracted leprosy from disobedience, so his son Jotham co-reigned, continuing to total 16 years. God called Isaiah as a Prophet and spiritual advisor the year Uzziah died and guided Jotham during his reign. Ahaz, Jotham’s son, turned his back on God, yet God used Isaiah to invite Ahaz to turn back (7:1-12), but he refused. Hezekiah continuously sought advice and prayer from Isaiah who guided Hezekiah’s steps in the Assyrian crisis, and with the major religious reforms Hezekiah introduced. He prophesied during the last 17 years of the Northern Kingdom, using their impending doom by Assyria as a warning to return to their God and forsake their injustices, idolatry and evil against their God, otherwise Assyria would destroy them as well.

Isaiah the Man

Isaiah was passionate about his God, his nation and his message which spanned approximately 50 years. He was fearless in his message to approach the kings of Judah, but also the kings of the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. He passionately shared God’s heart for his people – longing for them to turn back while He was still giving yet another window of time offering His mercy. Isaiah was humble and aware of his own sinful heart and lips, especially in contrast to his Holy God, the King of Kings. Isaiah’s vision of heaven’s throne room and God’s call will be discussed below in detail.

Isaiah was married to a woman who was a ‘prophetess’ (8:3), and

together they raised 2 sons. He was told to name each son with a specific name that spoke of God's intentions for Judah: 1. Maher-Shalal-hash-baz ('quick to plunder, and swift to the spoil' 8:1-4,18); 2. Shearjashub ('a remnant shall return' 7:3). These names foretold the nation's coming judgment and restoration (after captivity and in the distant future at the end of the age).

Isaiah used many forms of speech like similes, metaphors, personification, sarcasm, irony, and songs (chs.5,12,35,54), to drive home God's heart and message. He also willingly did odd things like wear a loin cloth and go barefoot for 3 entire years (20:1-6) to foretell how the Egyptians would be taken captive by Assyria (without clothing!) as a warning to Judah who had often trusted Egypt for security. The Bible does not say how Isaiah died, but tradition accounts that Isaiah was 'sawn in two' (Hebrews 11:37), during the reign of wicked King Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah (2Kings 21:16) from the Jewish writings in The Talmud.

Isaiah was an incredibly faithful man who found his identity in His God. He knew from the beginning that he would share the heart break that God carried. He would faithfully speak truth and hope to the people but they would mock him and ignore him. "Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced...Who then will bring charges against me? It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me" (50:4-10). When we can find our identity in being His, and living in His love and purposes, then the pressures of people and even ridicule can be shielded from us knowing the LORD is our helper and intimate friend.

Isaiah's Message

His major role was to be God's mouthpiece concerning 4 main topics: **JUDGMENT**- He was to announce that God's incredible patience and mercy were about to end. Because of longstanding disobedience (over 700 years since the Exodus) to the covenant with Yahweh, **judgment** was coming in two waves: from Assyria (the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.) and Babylon (destruction of the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C.). **REMNANT**- Yet, because God is always faithful to His covenant promises, Isaiah saw visions of a glorious future for God's chosen people. A **remnant** would be preserved through every season of chastisement and captivity, until the final days on earth. **MESSIAH**- A **Messiah** (Savior) would someday come first as a

‘Suffering Servant’ (ch.53) to shed His blood for the sins of humanity to redeem both Jews and Gentiles who would believe in Him. **EVERLASTING KINGDOM**- Secondly, Messiah would establish His rule over humanity with an **everlasting kingdom** that would bring righteousness and peace forever.

Isaiah’s prophetic collection is long, being comprised of many prophecies given during his lifetime of ministry. In general, his prophecies can be divided into two “books” as follows:

I. The Book of Judgment: 1-39

- A. Prophecies concerning Judah and Jerusalem 1-12
- B. Prophecies concerning the surrounding nations 13-23
- C. Prophecies concerning the entire earth and its inhabitants 24-35
- D. Historical interlude: Hezekiah and the Assyrian threat 36-39

II. The Book of Comfort: 40-66

- A. The One true God versus idols 40-48
- B. The Lord’s Servant Who brings Salvation 49-57
- C. The Future glory of God’s people 58-66

This section of notes will focus on chapters 1-39 only.

Overview of “The Book of Judgment” (chs.1-39).

God appeared to Isaiah in dramatic fashion in the temple (ch.6). Isaiah saw a vision of God in His heavenly temple seated on His heavenly throne being worshipped by fiery heavenly beings- ‘seraphim’. They cried out **“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.”** (6:3) Isaiah was shaken to his core, seeing God’s glory, recognizing his own sinfulness. Although he had been speaking to the Jews about their sinful lips and behaviors, now he identified with them, in light of this Holy God. When God asked for a messenger, Isaiah was quick to respond as His willing messenger. God cleansed and commissioned Isaiah to deliver a difficult message to the nation: Because of centuries of stubborn disobedience and rebellion against Yahweh, a *judicial hardening of heart* would fall on the people. God would *confirm the people in their own condition of stubborn disobedience* and this would lead to judgment. God told Isaiah from the beginning that he would give a message that would not be heeded, and being a prophet would be extremely difficult. Yet, Isaiah was pleased to suffer for His sake.

“Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (6:9,10).

When Isaiah asked God how long this hardening of hearts would last, the reply was clear:

Then I said, “For how long, Lord?” And he answered: “Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land” (6:11-13).

A. Prophecies concerning Judah and Jerusalem (ch.1-12).

The hard assignment for the prophets was always to proclaim true reality ‘from God’s perspective’, not what was happening to the people in everyday life which seemed right to them. The nation seemed to be prospering, but Isaiah’s message was opposite to the false prophets of his day: Judah was a ‘wretched victim’ (1:5,6), a ‘ravaged battlefield’ (1:7-9), and Jerusalem was as wicked as ancient Sodom and Gomorrah (3:9; Gen 18-19)! Key themes appear in this section:

The peoples’ sins: were murder, robbery, bribery, exploiting those who were helpless, deception, denying justice, coveting, drunkenness, idolatry and sexual prostitution for fertility blessings, divination, proud men, arrogant women flaunting and flirting, calling evil good and good evil, spurning God’s Law and discipline... yet all was glossed over and impending doom of the Assyrians’ invasion was denied.

God’s promises and hope: Sprinkled throughout the doom and gloom are some of the most well-loved verses of hope. Eg: After King Ahaz refused to ask for a ‘sign’, God promised HIS SIGN:

“Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel” (7:14).

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light: on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (9:2).

“For unto us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time forth and forever. The zeal of the Almighty will accomplish this” (9:6,7).

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse: from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him—the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD... He will not judge by what He sees with His eyes, or decide by what He hears with His ears; but with righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice He will give decisions to the poor of the earth... (11:1-5).

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat... The infant will play near the hole of the cobra... for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (11:6-9).

God’s Holy Wrath (anger): We must be careful to NOT judge God’s ‘anger and fierce wrath’ as we would a human out-of-control abusive rage, or a child’s temper tantrum. Wiersbe describes God’s wrath as ‘motivated by love, which is anguish. It’s the anguish of a father who wants the best for his children, but they prefer to go their own way’ (O.T. History, pg.568).

‘Wrath’ is an old English word defined as ‘deep, intense anger and indignation’. ‘Anger’ is defined as ‘stirring of resentful displeasure and strong antagonism, by a sense of injury or insult’; ‘indignation’ as ‘righteous anger aroused by injustice and baseness’. Such is wrath. And wrath, the Bible tells us, is an attribute of God (J. I. Packer).

B. Prophecies concerning the surrounding nations (ch.13-23).

In this section, God pronounces judgment on all 11 of the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. They were Babylon, Assyria,

Philistia, Moab, Damascus of Syria, Israel, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Arabia and Phoenicia. Although they did not have the Laws of Moses and were not in a special “covenant relationship” with Yahweh, they were still accountable to God for how they treated their fellow human beings. We see several broad themes in this section.*

- God is in control of the nations of the world, and He can do with them what He pleases.

- God especially hates the sin of pride (13:11; 16:6; 23:9). When nations turn from the living God to trust their wealth and their armaments, God must show them that He is the only sure refuge.

- God judges the nations for the way they treat each other. Judah is the only nation mentioned that had God’s laws; yet, God held the other Gentile nations accountable for what they did.

- God always gives a word of promise and hope to His people. Babylon will fall, but God will care for Judah (14:1-3,32). Moab will not accept sanctuary from Jerusalem, but God will one day establish Messiah’s rule over Moab (16:5). Assyria and Egypt may be avowed enemies of the Jews, but one day the three nations will together glorify God (19:23-25).

- Therefore, no matter how frightening the national or international situation may become, God’s children can have peace because they know that Almighty God is on His throne (see Psalm 2:4).

**From Warren Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, The Prophets - Isaiah, p.29.*

C. Prophecies concerning judgment of the entire earth and its inhabitants, and the of the Messianic Kingdom (ch.24-35).

Isaiah turns his God-given prophecies to the whole world. The prophets often refer to this time period of world-wide reckoning as “the Day of the Lord.” The N.T. parallels this time in Matt 24, Mark 13, and Revelation 6-19. Will there ever be justice for the oppressed and judgment for the proud and rebellious? Isaiah affirms that in the end there will. *“Isaiah 24-27 describes a global judgment that will end with the destruction of God’s enemies and the restoration of God’s people Israel in their land” (Wiersbe, OT Prophets, p.30).* The next sub-section (chs.28-31) shifts the focus back to God’s people and the reasons they will experience God’s judgment. *“Chapters 28-31 record a series of five “woes” (28:1; 29:1,15; 30:1; 31:1) that focus primarily on Jerusalem. Interspersed with these “woes” of judgment are promises of*

restoration and glory. Isaiah is attempting to get the rulers of Judah to stop trusting “power politics” and international treaties and start trusting the Lord” (Wiersbe, p.34). The last sub-section (chs.32-35) focuses on the reign of the Righteous King in the midst of a restored Zion (Israel). It begins with this: “Behold, a king will reign righteously, and princes will rule justly” (32:1). It ends with this: “And the ransomed of the Lord will return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (35:10).

D. Historical interlude: Hezekiah and the Assyrian threat and his prayer when he became mortally ill (ch.36-39).

This section covers the same historical incidents found in 2Kings 18-20 and 2Chronicles 29-32. There is one major addition to the narrative: Hezekiah’s personal account of *his prayer for healing* at the time of his illness is given in full (Isaiah 38:9-20).

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery: I said, “In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?” I said, “I will not again see the LORD himself in the land of the living; no longer will I look on my fellow man, or be with those who now dwell in this world. Like a shepherd’s tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me. I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me. I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am being threatened; Lord, come to my aid!”

But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. Lord, by such things people live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live. Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; parents tell their children about your faithfulness. The LORD will save me, and we will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the LORD.”

GOD ON DISPLAY: God's passion for relationship IS with those He has made in His image. Although this was directed to the Jews, the N.T. amplifies God's heart for every human being to know Him and to be brought under His mercy, and salvation. His holiness is an immutable attribute of His Divinity. He cannot change it but He has made provision for it through His Divine Son, sinless and willing to become one of us to redeem us from God's holy wrath that breaks out against all humans. Christ bore His Father's wrath against sin for our sake. He is a GOD OF LOVE, and a GOD OF JUSTICE. His 'unusual work' is judgment, therefore He is so incredibly LONG-SUFFERING in His MERCY and PATIENCE. So many warnings, so many chances to turn back (repent). May we lean into His indescribable LOVE and choose to believe that He is FOR US.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Isaiah's vision of God's HOLINESS and his response impact you (Isaiah ch.6)?
2. It was God's MERCY that caused Him to offer cleansing and forgiveness to Isaiah. How does the mercy of God for your life impact you?
3. God's FAITHFULNESS led Him to give Isaiah many visions of the future, including the Messiah and the Kingdom. Which future vision is your favorite? How does the faithfulness of God minister to your soul right now?

Sermon Overview: Isaiah's Vision of God

(as a picture of the overall message of Isaiah)

Isaiah was confronted with a vision of God's HOLINESS:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke (6:1-4).

He then saw his own (and the nations) UNCLEANNES:

"Woe is me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean

lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (6:5).

The whole nation was weighed down with sin:

“Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him” (1:4).

God’s holiness and our sin cannot coexist. A SEPARATION occurs:

“Behold, the LORD’S hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made A SEPARATION between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (59:1,2).

Yet, the Holy One also wants to be the Saving One:

“There is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (45:1,2).

“Therefore, the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him” (Isaiah 30:18).

We have a choice to respond to or reject God’s offer of mercy:

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you CONSENT and OBEY, you will eat the best of the land; but if you REFUSE and REBEL, you will be devoured by the sword.” Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (1:18-19).

For thus the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, has said, “In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.” But you were not willing . . . (Isaiah 30:15).

Isaiah chose the path of repentance for himself.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven” (Isaiah 6:6,7).

Cleansed and forgiven, God was able to use Isaiah for His purposes.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me” (6:8).

Israel refused to repent and be cleansed. They would face judgment.

“The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your father’s house such days as have never come since the day that Ephraim separated from Judah, the king of Assyria” (7:17).

Yet, because of God’s faithfulness, there was still a future for Israel.

1. A Remnant will be Preserved

“Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And He will lift up a standard for the nations and assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth . . . And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant of His people who will be left, just as there was for Israel in the day that they came up out of the land of Egypt” (11:11,12,16).

2. A Messiah will be Provided

“Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear; but with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist” (11:1-5).

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (9:6,7).

3. A Kingdom will be Prepared

“In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance” (19:23,24).

“And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (11:6-9).



*Credit to *The Bible Project* for some of the imagery in the above diagram. Follow *The Bible Project* if you want to see some amazing summaries of all the books of the Bible!

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Captivity and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 3 – Isaiah: His Visions of the Future
Isaiah 40-66

Introduction

The first half of Isaiah (1-39) focused on the theme of judgment. God's people would face divine discipline because of centuries of disobedience to the covenant with Yahweh. The Assyrian and Babylonian invasions (722 and 586 B.C.) would wipe out both the northern and southern kingdoms. The second half of Isaiah (40-66) focuses on comfort and hope. Because God is *faithful*, He will never abandon His people; on the contrary, He will act to fulfill His promises in the future. Because God is *incomparably great*, nothing can stop Him from fulfilling His promises. Thus, a nation headed toward captivity is given a reassuring picture of the future. *Nothing will stop Yahweh from restoring His people after a time of discipline.* Included in this hopeful vision of the future are numerous pictures of the ONE who would someday come from God to redeem Israel from all her sins – the “Servant of the Lord,” or the “Messiah.” Isaiah chapters 40-66 naturally divides into three mini-books with specific themes:

- I. God's Strength brings Security: 40-48
- II. God's Servant brings Salvation: 49-57
- III. God's Servant brings the Kingdom: 58-66

I. God's Strength brings Security: 40-48

Comfort because of God's Incomparable Majesty: 40

The second half of Isaiah opens with a clear announcement of the theme: Comfort because of God's incomparable majesty.

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God. “Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins” (40:1,2).

The good news of Israel's future restoration should be proclaimed from the highest mountain.

Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news,

lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (40:9-11).

The longest part of chapter 40 is devoted to a stunning description of the majesty and might of Israel's incomparable God (40:12-26). (We will not quote this long section; but you should read it.) This description is a critical part of Isaiah's message of comfort because: *It is God's incomparable greatness that assures His people that He will overcome ANY adversary in order to restore their place in the world.*

Thus, the question . . .

Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God" (40:27)?

has a definitive answer . . .

"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary" (40:28-31).

The people of God must not lose heart. They must turn to God in the midst of their desolations and keep their hope in Him. If they "wait for the Lord, they will gain new strength" from Him.

Whatever challenges we face in life, the picture of God in Isaiah 40 should encourage us. There is NO problem too great for God to handle. Thus, we must learn to "wait for the Lord" (to rest in Him, rely upon Him, trust Him) with our problems. When God decides it is time to move on our behalf, NOTHING will stop Him from accomplishing His purposes for our lives. Is there a situation in your life right now that you need to completely hand over to the Lord? Use Isaiah 40:9-31 as a guide. Read it through and commit your ways to the God who can hold the entire universe in the palm of His hand. Surely He is strong enough to take care of you!

Other nations trust in vain idols: 41

Israel was terrified by the powerful nations that threatened them; but the reality was that Israel had a GOD that was unlike the “gods” of the other nations, therefore, they could rest assured:

“But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend, you whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you. Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand’” (41:8-10).

The Servant will bring forth Justice on Earth: 42:1-9

Sprinkled throughout the second half of Isaiah are the “Servant Songs.” These are fascinating. In some passages, the Servant is Israel (see above, 41:8-10); but in other passages, the Servant is a special Israelite; a man that God would raise up to save His people. Chapter 42 provides the first clear example of a Servant prophecy that has a special person in view, the Messiah:

“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law” (42:1-4).

This passage was quoted by Matthew with reference to the public ministry of Jesus (see Matthew 12:18-21). Further, the Servant will bring the light of God’s truth to all nations:

“I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison” (42:6,7).

This passage, along with 61:1-3, formed the basis of Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, in which He set forth His mission as Israel’s Messiah and Savior of the world (see Luke 4:16-19).

Note: Isaiah the prophet is *quoted 55 times in the New Testament*; second only to Psalms, which are quoted 68 times.

Who can reverse what God has planned? 43,44

There was much uncertainty in the hearts of God's people (as a result of the prospect of captivity in Babylon). Their fears are met by strong words of reassurance, based on God's greatness:

“Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me. I, even I, am the LORD, and there is no Savior besides Me. It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed . . . Even from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (43:10-13).

Even Babylon would someday fall under the mighty hand of Israel's God (43:14-21). The message is: *Have no fear! There is NO OTHER GOD besides YAHWEH!*

The Cyrus prophecy: 44:26-45:4

As proof of the certainty of Israel's blessed future (and of the power of God over against the false gods), God gave Isaiah the supernatural prophetic ability to name the specific Persian king that would someday arise to overthrow the Babylonians. This king (Cyrus) would also issue a proclamation for Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem to rebuild God's house. (Note: Isaiah prophesied about 150 years before Cyrus, lived and reigned!)

It is I who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.’ And he declares of Jerusalem, ‘She will be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation will be laid.’ Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed . . . ‘I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me’ (44:26-45:4).

How reassuring to know that God can even raise up a pagan king (who does not worship God) to fulfill His purposes in the world. Perhaps there are people in your life right now who are not making things easy for you. Consider this: God uses even your opponents to further His purposes in and through your life. Take some time to ponder: How might God be using this seemingly difficult person (relationship) to bring about His purposes in your life? How is He growing you through this situation? How might He use your life as a witness in this very situation?

The One True God will be Worshipped! 45

The uniqueness and preeminence of God is a major theme throughout this part of Isaiah. Now, the call is made to all people to turn to Him and be saved.

“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance” (45:22,23).

This passage points to *the supremacy of God* in the world; but it also points to the *deity of Jesus Christ*. The apostle Paul used this precise verse to describe the Lord Jesus Christ:

“For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that EVERY TONGUE WILL CONFESS that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Babylon’s idols cannot save her from the True God: 46-47

The people of Israel are reassured once again that the “gods” of other nations, like Babylon, are worthless and impotent.

“I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (46:9,10).

Ch.47 is a lament sung over a fallen Babylon (a fall that would occur much later in history at the hands of the Persians). Yes, it was God who raised up the Babylonians to chastise His people, Israel. Yet, their pride and idolatry as a nation would be judged by God. Their beauty and power would be stripped from them.

Israel’s stubbornness and God’s faithfulness: 48

In the closing chapter of this first mini-book (chs. 40-48), God reminds Israel of her longstanding hardness of heart toward Him (48:1-11). Nevertheless, His covenant loyalty makes their future deliverance and restoration a certainty!

Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with the sound of joyful shouting, proclaim this, send it out to the end of the earth; say, “The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob” (48:20).

Each of the three mini-books ends with a warning to the wicked (compare 48:22 with 57:20,21 and 66:24).

“There is no peace for the wicked,” says the LORD (48:22).

II. God’s SERVANT brings Salvation: 49-57

The second mini-book (chs.49-57) emphasizes the role of God’s Servant in bringing salvation to the world. There are Servant passages elsewhere in the book, but the major ones occur here, especially the monumental Servant Song in ch.53.

The Servant will bring Judah and Israel back to God: 49:1-13

Chapter 49 opens with a clear, extended reference to the Messiah.

Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me. He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver . . . And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and My God is My strength), He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One, to the despised One, to the One abhorred by the nation, to the Servant of rulers, “Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You” (49:1-7).

God’s Servant (Messiah) will not only bring Judah and Israel back to the Lord, but also the Gentile nations so that the salvation of God may reach the ends of the earth. Yet, in the process, He will be *“abhorred by the nation.”*

God’s will never forget His people: 49:14-26

But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me” (49:14-16).

What a beautiful picture of the *faithfulness of God* toward His people!

Isn't it reassuring to know that God never forgets His beloved children? I love the picture here: "I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands." I like to imagine that God has my name tattooed on His hands, so that whenever He looks at His hands, He is reminded of me. God never forgets you. He never stops thinking about you. He never abandons or forsakes you.

The Servant will obey God's specific instructions: 50

As the Servant Songs progress, it becomes clear that the Servant will obediently follow God down a path that involves *suffering at the hands of wicked men*.

***"The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient nor did I turn back. I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. For the Lord GOD helps Me, therefore, I am not disgraced; therefore, I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed"* (50:4-7).**

The Servant will suffer for the sins of the world: 52:13 – 53:12

This particular Servant Song is of utmost importance. It describes the suffering, death and restoration of the Servant. Here we learn that the Servant *suffers as a guilt offering for the sins of the people*. We will examine this song section by section.

- He will be highly exalted because of His suffering.

***"Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted. Just as many were astonished at you, My people, so His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men. Thus He will sprinkle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of Him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand"* (52:13-15).**

His exaltation comes as a result of His suffering. The word "sprinkle" has connotations of the blood of the atonement that was sprinkled on the altar by the High Priest, bringing forgiveness of sins. The message: The Servant will be abused and marred; but in the process of suffering, He will sprinkle nations with the blood of atonement, leading to the forgiveness of sins. Then, He will be exalted as the King of all kings as people realize Who it was that suffered.

- He will have an obscure, vulnerable beginning.

“Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He grew up before Him like a tender-shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should-be attracted to Him” (53:1,2).

He will not have a stately, majestic upbringing, as a typical royal heir. In fact, His beginnings will be so fragile that God will have to provide special care over Him. People will not recognize that a future King is in their midst.

- He will be despised by men; a man of sorrows.

“He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (53:3).

The typical messianic vision in Israel was of a *mighty son of David* who would come to rule the world from his throne amidst an exalted Israel. Yet, the Messiah that Isaiah sees is rejected and forsaken; a *“man of sorrows.”* We can now begin to see why many Jews pondered the possibility of two separate Messiahs – a royal, reigning Messiah from the line of David, and a priestly, suffering Messiah from the line of Levi. It was inconceivable to them how these two very different pictures of Messiah (suffering and ruling) could be united in one person.

- He will suffer as a substitute sacrifice for the sins of others.

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (53:4-6).

The Old Testament sacrificial system was built around the idea of substitutionary atonement (a sacrifice given in place of the sinner). Thus, animal sacrifices would be given to “bear the sins” of the one coming to receive forgiveness from God. Here in Isaiah 53, the Servant is depicted as the One sent by God to “bear the sins” of the people – to be the substitute sacrifice. It would be the LORD Who would cause *“the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.”* WE have gone astray . . . but HE takes the penalty for our straying! That is the very definition of GRACE!

- He will suffer willingly and silently.

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth” (53:7).

- He will die and, surprisingly, be buried in a rich man’s grave.

“By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth” (53:8,9).

Jesus, as a condemned criminal, would have been buried on the garbage dump outside the city of Jerusalem. Yet, it was Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Jewish Council (and a secret follower of Jesus) who asked Pilate for the body of Jesus so that he could bury Jesus in his own (rich man’s) grave (Matt.27:57-60).

- He will be restored so that He can see His offspring.

“But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (53:10,11).

The Lord was pleased to crush the Servant as a *guilt offering*. Then, the Servant will have *“His days prolonged”* and He will be allowed to *“see His offspring.”* His *“children”* are all those who have been *“justified”* (declared righteous) by means of His guilt offering. Of course, the resurrection of Jesus explains how the Servant could die, yet live again to see His *“children.”*

- He will be exalted because of His suffering.

The Servant song ends as it began (see 52:13-15) with the exaltation of the Servant as a result of His willingness to suffer unto death.

“Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (53:12).

The suffering Servant will become the exalted King. What a mystery!

Jesus was not just a great teacher, a prophet, or a religious leader. He was GOD in flesh Who came to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, in order to bring people back into relationship with God. Did Isaiah and the other prophets fully understand WHO they were describing and WHAT He would do when He came to earth? It seems that even they were left with much mystery surrounding their own prophecies. Read 1 Peter 1:10-12. Prophets like Isaiah were told by God that their messianic prophecies would be fulfilled in a later generation; but they were not told the specifics of WHO and WHAT they were being allowed to describe under the supernatural inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (See also 2Peter 1:21 on how “inspiration” happened.)

The Future Joy and Fertility of God’s People: 53-57

After the powerful Servant Song of ch.53, the picture shifts to the future joy and glory of God’s people – precisely because of the Servant’s willingness to bear their sins and bring God’s forgiveness. There are several calls for people to *respond to God’s grace*:

“Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (55:6,7).

This second mini-book, like the first, ends with the identical warning to the wicked who spurn God’s grace and mercy:

“There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked” (57:20-21).

III. God’s Servant brings the Kingdom: 58-66

The final “mini-book” (chs.58-66) depicts the future glory of Israel as a result of the Servant’s ministry of redemption.

Israel will take center stage in the Lord’s Kingdom: 60

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples; but the LORD will rise upon you and His glory will appear upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (60:1-3).

The Servant will announce both liberty and judgment: 61-63

The Servant takes center stage again. *The following passage is the one that Jesus chose to quote and apply to Himself in His defining sermon in His hometown synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-19).*

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified” (61:1-3).

The Servant will not only proclaim “*the favorable year of the Lord*” (a reference to the Year of Jubilee, in which all debts were forgiven); but He will also proclaim “*the day of vengeance of our God.*” The future holds bright prospects for those who respond to God’s redeeming love; but it holds the prospect of judgment for those who spurn His love and mercy.

A final call to humble repentance: 66

Thus says the LORD, “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,” declares the LORD. “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (66:1,2).

God does not need our temples. The universe is not a big enough temple for Him (recall ch.40 on the immensity and magnificence of God). What God wants is our hearts – in a humble and contrite condition. He wants people who have a deep reverence for His Word. Does this passage describe your spirit before God? Are you humble and contrite over your own brokenness before a holy God? Do you have a receptive, reverent countenance toward His Word? What an amazing thought: the universe is not big enough to be His throne; but He willingly enthrones Himself in the hearts of those who bow before Him. “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (57:15).

Discussion Questions

1. Read Isaiah 40. The promise is that the strength of God is available to all who wait for Him. Is there some area in your life where you need Almighty God to come through for you?

2. Review the following 4 Servant passages: 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-7; 52:13-53:12. 61:1-3. How do these passages enrich your understanding of Jesus and His mission?
3. Read Acts 8:26-40. Notice that the Ethiopian man was reading from Isaiah 53, yet he did not know *who* Isaiah the prophet was referring to. What do you think Philip told the man when he asked him about this passage? Is there someone that God is leading you to in order to point them to Jesus?
4. What is the biggest ah-ha that you will personally take away from our brief journey through the book of Isaiah?

Historical Note: In 1946 the **Dead Sea Scrolls** were discovered in caves by the Dead Sea in Israel. An entire library of ancient Jewish sacred scrolls had been preserved in pottery jars. This was the library of a radical Jewish sect known as the **Essenes** who lived in these caves right around the time of Jesus. Among the scrolls was a complete **Isaiah scroll**, dated by scholars to have been written around 200 B.C. Before this discovery, the earliest scroll of Isaiah was from roughly 1,000 years later. When scholars compared the scrolls that were 1,000 years apart in date, they found that there was very little difference between them, proving the *integrity* of the Hebrew Bible over the centuries. Thus, the argument that *time* had introduced *corruption* and *error* into the books of the Bible was proven false. God had seen to the careful preservation of His Word over the centuries. (The integrity of the New Testament documents is based on the vast number of ancient manuscripts that are available for comparison – roughly 10,000.)



GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 4 – Josiah: Rediscovering the Bible
2Chronicles 34,35; 2Kings 22, 23:1-31

Introduction

Josiah was the last great king of Judah in the years leading up to the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.). He inherited a kingdom on the verge of collapse. His grandfather, Manasseh, had reigned 55 years, leading the nation into gross idolatry – even worse than the Canaanites (Amorites) who had dwelt in the land for 400 years before the conquest under Joshua. Manasseh worshipped Molech and offered his sons in fire as part of the worship ritual. *“Manasseh shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end” (2Kings 21:16)*. It was because of Manasseh’s wickedness that God determined that Judah would go into captivity. (Manasseh did repent of his wickedness near the end of his life after being taken into captivity with a hook in his nose! God mercifully allowed him to return to Jerusalem where he tried to reverse all his wrongs against God. However, it was not in time to make substantial reforms and turn the people’s hearts back to God.) Manasseh’s son, Amon, followed in his father’s earlier pattern of evil turning again to idolatry, yet he reigned for just 2 years. **Josiah** then became king at 8 years old and he reigned for 31 years. He led a spiritual reform in Judah much like that of Hezekiah, his great grandfather. Josiah’s good reign would bring a season of peace and joy to God’s people, before their final plunge into wickedness and eventual captivity in Babylon.

Early Reforms: 2Chronicles: 34:1-7

“In the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles and idols. Under his direction the altars of the Baals were torn down; he cut to pieces the incense altars that were above them, and smashed the Asherah poles and the idols” (34:3,4).

Josiah was just 16 years old when he began to *“seek the God of his father David.”* Between the years 16-20 he developed his own faith and understanding of God. Then, when he was 20 years old,

he began to purge Judah of idolatry. For the extent of his reforms, read the account in 2Kings 23. Note the extent of the idolatry practiced by the previous kings *and* the radical nature of Josiah's effort to purge Judah from every last vestige of idolatry.

Young people can be inspired by Josiah. He grew in his own faith while still young; then moved quickly to call the nation back to God. As the apostle Paul wrote to young Timothy: "Let no one look down on your youthfulness; rather, in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe" (1Timothy 4:12). Young people can make a big difference in the world if they are committed to seeking and serving God.

Repair of the Temple: 34:8-13

When Josiah was 26, he began to repair and rebuild the temple of the Lord, which had fallen into complete ruin during the long, wicked reigns of his predecessors Manasseh and Amon.

"In the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, to purify the land and the temple, he sent Shaphan son of Azaliah and Maaseiah the ruler of the city, with Joah son of Joahaz, the recorder, to repair the temple of the LORD his God" (34:8).

The work was overseen by the Levites – the priestly tribe responsible for the temple – while the work force was comprised of *faithful* laborers from other tribes and all walks of life.

"The workers labored faithfully. Over them to direct them were Jahath and Obadiah, Levites descended from Merari, and Zechariah and Meshullam, descended from Kohath. The Levites—all who were skilled in playing musical instruments—had charge of the laborers and supervised all the workers from job to job. Some of the Levites were secretaries, scribes and gatekeepers" (34:12,13).

What a great picture of how the body of Christ is to function: all the workers "from job to job." Each person had a different role to play in the overall effort to rebuild the temple. Similarly, each person in the body of Christ has been uniquely gifted to play a role in building "the Church" (the visible representation of the kingdom of God on earth today). Have you found your place on the team in God's building work today? Start by serving somewhere where there's a need. Over time, God will begin to direct you to the specific role(s) He has designed you to fulfill in the body of Christ. "He who is faithful in little will also be faithful in much" (Luke 16:10).

Discovery of the long-lost Bible: 34:14,15

While they were refurbishing the temple, a shocking discovery was made: The workers found a copy of the five books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy) which had been *lost and forgotten* during the long, wicked reign of Manasseh.

“While they were bringing out the money that had been taken into the temple of the LORD, Hilkiah the priest found the Book of the Law of the LORD that had been given through Moses. Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD” (34:14,15).

This “Book of the Law” would have been a scroll (or series of scrolls) containing the record of Abraham’s descendants, leading up to and culminating in the sacred covenant made between Yahweh and Israel at Mt. Sinai (the equivalent of our books Genesis - Deuteronomy). The amazing thing to ponder is that the people of God had been living for so many years without wondering where the copy of the scrolls were.

In the movie, The Book of Eli, a lone warrior makes his way through a post-apocalyptic wasteland carrying the only remaining copy of a treasured book. The “bad guy” wants to steal the book from Eli since he knows the power the book has. Eli fights to retain his treasure (a Bible). The message is not unlike that of Josiah: When a culture loses the Word of God, it begins to rapidly decay. When a culture rediscovers the Word of God, it can begin the process of healing and rebuilding. This begs the question: What about America today? We ARE losing sight of the Word of God. Believers (young and old) need to find time and creative ways to absorb God’s precious Word each day. Whether you listen on your audio books app in the car, in the bathroom or kitchen, or read on your iPhone, android, iPad or actual Bible, how can you intentionally allow God’s truths to draw you to know God better, and grow you up in your faith?

Josiah reads from the Bible: 34:16-21

When the king heard the words of the Law, he tore his robes. He gave these orders to Hilkiah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary and Asaiah the king’s attendant: “Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the remnant in Israel and Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD’s anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept

the word of the LORD; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book” (34:19-21).

While Josiah may have read much more of the book, it seems certain that he read the concluding chapters of Deuteronomy - the blessings and curses associated with obedience or disobedience to the covenant with Yahweh (Deuteronomy 28-34). When he read this section, he immediately understood why the nation was experiencing such difficulty: *“Great is the Lord’s anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the Lord . . .”*. He tore his robes in anguish.

So often when we go through extended difficulties in life we fail to ask the all-important question: Might my difficulties be due to the fact that I have been trying to live my life my own way, rather than seeking the heart and will of God? This is not to say that life “with God” is always smooth and easy, and life “apart from God” is always difficult and full of trials. Yet, when we are walking closely with God, even the difficult seasons of life will be met with more peace, resolve and a sense that God is working out His plan in our lives. We should pay attention when life is not working well and honestly ask: Am I trying to do things on my own? Am I inviting God into my daily decision-making process? Am I seeking His direction and guidance for my life? Or, am I going my own way?

Huldah the prophetess consulted for direction: 34:22-28

Josiah’s advisors immediately sought counsel from a godly woman, the prophetess Huldah, wife of Shallum, Josiah’s wardrobe keeper. Since the wardrobe keeper was in very close contact with the king daily, it is certain Shallum saw firsthand Josiah’s sincere faith, and Josiah knew Huldah’s reputation.

“Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the remnant in Israel and Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD’s anger that is poured out on us because those who have gone before us have not kept the word of the LORD; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written in this book.” Hilkiyah and those the king had sent with him went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum . . . keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the New Quarter” (34:21,22).

Huldah’s answer to the king’s messengers revealed her insight into God’s Word, and her courage to speak the truth in a very difficult time . . . no matter what the cost. It was clear and in two parts:

She said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: (1) Tell the man who sent you to me, ‘This is what the LORD says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people—all the curses written in the book that has been read in the presence of the king of Judah. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all that their hands have made, my anger will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched.’ (2) Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. Now I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place and on those who live here.’” So they took her answer back to the king (34:23-28).

Additional Insights on Huldah the Prophetess

Huldah’s Role

Huldah’s prophetic role was significant. She was God’s voice to the nation between the ministries of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Her importance is evidenced by the fact she was immediately consulted by King Josiah’s leaders after the discovery of the long-lost Bible. Her words were deemed accurate and authoritative, so much so that the king depended on her words for direction for the entire nation.

She proclaimed that God would soon bring disaster on Judah because of continued disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant and they would be expelled from the land. Yet, she also proclaimed that God had seen Josiah’s responsive heart of humility and brokenness, therefore God would spare the nation during Josiah’s lifetime, and Josiah would be buried in peace.

God used Huldah to inspire and empower Josiah to lead a national revival. Josiah personally read to the nation from the Book of the Law. He then celebrated the largest Passover of any of the kings. He also eradicated any remaining idol worship from the land.

Her Feminine Strength

Huldah was fearless. While there was no Bible being read during

her day, she was “the voice of God” to the people. She daily spoke God’s words to people who came to consult her. She was full of wisdom and the courage to speak even if it was bad news. She balanced being married to Shallum, the King’s wardrobe keeper, with her role as God’s prophetess to the people.

God on Display

God’s Word was put on display through Huldah’s bold prophetic voice. She inspired King Josiah to continue honoring God and reforming the nation. God was brought back to center stage in Judah through Huldah’s prophetic ministry and through Josiah’s commitment to follow the Law of Moses in the Word of God.

How did God use her life?

Excavations in Jerusalem have revealed “Huldah’s Gate,” a main entrance into the ancient temple mount! Huldah’s legacy of leading people back to God lives on, both through biblical record and the archaeological record.

Huldah is an example of faithfulness to use God’s gifts that He has given to each one of us. Hers was the gift of prophecy, and she was trustworthy in the stewardship of that gift in her lifetime. Huldah inspires the question: How am I being faithful to God with my gifts, and by building trust before people for the wider purposes of God in my world today?

We are privileged to own Bibles today. We must take time to hide God’s Word in our hearts and to obey it. God can use us to make an impact in our world as we share God’s truth with others with words of encouragement and/or gentle, respectful correction.

Josiah reads God’s Word to the nation: 34:29-30

Imagine the scene: A 26 year-old king standing before the nation on the steps of the temple, reading from the rediscovered Bible (which none of the people had ever heard or read before).

“Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He went up to the temple of the LORD with the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests and the Levites—all the people from the least to the greatest. He read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant, which had been found in the temple of the LORD” (34:29,30).

This was glorious occasion because of the rediscovery of God’s truth; yet it is sad to think that the Bible had been forgotten.

Recommitment to the covenant with God: 34:31-33

Josiah not only *read* the Bible to the people, he also invited them to enter into a covenant renewal ceremony.

“The king stood by his pillar and renewed the covenant in the presence of the LORD—to follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, and to obey the words of the covenant written in this book. Then he had everyone in Jerusalem and Benjamin pledge themselves to it; the people of Jerusalem did this in accordance with the covenant of God, the God of their ancestors . . . As long as he lived, they did not fail to follow the LORD, the God of their ancestors” (34:31-33).

It is interesting to note the power of a leader. *“As long as he lived, they did not fail to follow the Lord . . .”* Josiah was a strong young and respected leader who called an entire nation back to God!

The Great Passover Celebration: 35:1-19

Josiah proceeded to have THE greatest Passover celebration in the history of the nation. The unusual feature of this Passover was that *everything necessary for the feast was provided by Josiah*. In a typical Passover celebration, each family would bring their own Passover lamb for the sacrifice and celebration.

“Josiah provided for all the lay people who were there a total of thirty thousand lambs and goats for the Passover offerings, and also three thousand cattle—all from the king’s own possessions” (35:7).

Josiah knew that the rediscovered Word of God was placing upon the people a set of rules and observations that were unfamiliar to them. He did not assume that their commitment to the Word of God was as firm and developed as his own; thus, he took steps to ensure that the people would participate in the Passover in the proper way by literally providing the main sacrificial animals himself. Josiah’s heart was good in this, and his example was incredible. The result could go two ways: the people would be eager the following year to bring their own sacrifices; OR, they could take for granted the free gift of atonement and forgiveness, since it cost them nothing, not owning their personal responsibility to follow in his faith steps. God calls us who desire to be an example, to do as Josiah did, and pray that those who follow us will be inspired by our devotion, desiring to grow to be like us. However, we are only responsible for our own faithfulness. Each person must respond to God themselves.

The death of Josiah: 35:20-24

“In 608 Pharaoh Neco of Egypt joined forces with Assyria against the Babylonians. Josiah was pro-Babylon and wasn’t happy about the Egyptians marching along the western boarder of Judah, so he led the army of Judah against him. Josiah had no mandate from the Lord to get involved in the dispute between Egypt and Babylon, yet Pharaoh claimed that the Lord had commanded him to help Assyria (2Chron 35:22). (Wiersbe O.T. History, p.590-591)

Neco tried to warn Josiah to stay away; but he went to war anyway and ended up dying in battle.

After all this, when Josiah had set the temple in order, Necho king of Egypt went up to fight at Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Josiah marched out to meet him in battle. But Necho sent messengers to him, saying, “What quarrel is there, king of Judah, between you and me? It is not you I am attacking at this time, but the house with which I am at war. God has told me to hurry; so stop opposing God, who is with me, or he will destroy you.” Josiah, however, would not turn away from him, but disguised himself to engage him in battle. He would not listen to what Necho had said at God’s command but went to fight him on the plain of Megiddo (35:20-22).

2Kings 23:25 gives King Josiah a commendation that few people will ever have said of them at their memorial. It is even more extraordinary that Josiah was a young adult throughout his reign. Jesus said that the whole Mosaic Law (Deut. 6:5), could be summed up in one command (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). This is exactly the description of Josiah’s legacy.

“Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did- with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses” (2Kings 23:25).

Josiah lived out his faith with courage and passion for God’s glory with great hopes that his leadership and example would turn the people’s hearts **permanently** back to God. Sadly, (Jer. 11:1-13), the national revival was more outward than inward, from the heart. The rest of the kings of Judah and the people did not love or obey God at all. We are only responsible for our own lives and fervency for God in our own generation. We must pray for the next generation as we model our own devotion, but the O.T. has shown

us again and again, that we can only truly be faithful with our personal life and serve God in our OWN generation. (See Acts 13:36 on King David).

Discussion Questions

1. Josiah was a ‘bright light’ sandwiched between his grandfather, father, and son and grandson who were evil kings before and after him. How does that impact you?
2. (2Chron. 34:3) ‘In the 8th year of his reign (16 yrs old), Josiah began to seek the God of his forefather David. In his 12th year (20 yrs old), he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem...’ What ways do you think Josiah may have used to seek the God of David for those 4 years? How did those ways prepare his heart to courageously purge his nation of idol worship?
3. Josiah’s extreme emotional response after Shaphan read the Book of the Law to him (2Chron. 34:27) caused God’s heart to be moved, as proclaimed by the Prophetess Huldah. What is God looking for in each one of us? What does that really look like? What next step is God prompting in you?

“This is the one I esteem: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word” (Isaiah 66:2)



Huldah's Gate in Jerusalem

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 5 – Jeremiah: Pictures

Introduction

Jeremiah was the last great prophet of the Southern Kingdom (Judah). He spoke for God during the final years of godly King Josiah's reign, but also during the following reigns of Josiah's descendants: Kings Jehoahaz (3mths), Jehoiakim (11yrs), Jehoiachin (3 mths), and Zedekiah (11yrs), who did not follow in their forefather Josiah's godly heritage. God's final judgment was predicted, yet a repentant heart among those in the nation was still an option for mercy, unbelievably (4:1-4), if heeded. However, the unheeded pleadings were now leading to an impending dark hour of the Babylonian captivity. The 'false' prophets among Jeremiah's contemporaries, were continuing to predict that Judah was going to have a light and short '2-year discipline' (Jer. 28:3,4; 38:1-4). Jeremiah's message proclaimed the opposite - that the Babylonians were certainly going to take them into captivity for 70 years (25:1-14). There would be a long horrific siege, the destruction of the magnificently built temple of King Solomon, and all their cities and farm lands destroyed.

God's earlier predictions through Moses (Deut.28), had been repeated through all the prophets up to Isaiah and finally Jeremiah, that if they chose not to obey the Mosaic covenant they would be expelled from God's precious and holy land.

Jeremiah was also to proclaim that it was God's will for them to willingly accept the yoke of the Babylonian captivity so that they could flourish and eventually return to their land. This message made Jeremiah immensely unpopular and led to the charge that he was an anti-nationalist traitor, being thrown into prison for proclaiming a treasonous message. He prophesied that they would choose to resist God's promise and ally themselves with the other nations. In the end, Jeremiah was shown to be 'God's true messenger', while all the other prophets who pointed the people in the opposite direction were shown to be liars. Throughout Jeremiah's prophecies, God spoke of the future of His people who

would be a blessing to the whole world, led by a righteous KING (Jesus the LORD), who would be a human descendant of King David (Jer 23:5,6). At that time, the hearts of the Israelites would be a true heart of faith and obedience, unlike the hearts of the people during Jeremiah's day. God Himself, ("*I will...*", ch.30,31), would bring about great healing and restoration. Jeremiah was 'the prophet of the broken heart'. God's emphasis on 'the heart' was mentioned some 66 times throughout Jeremiah's messages. God propelled Jeremiah to go and preach judgment not only to Judah but to all the nations surrounding Israel who also had not acknowledged Him as the Sovereign LORD, and had abused His chosen people (chs. 46-51).

Jeremiah was born in Anathoth, into a lineage of priests. His father was Hilkiyah, not to be confused with Hilkiyah the 'High Priest' under King Josiah. He was still a young man (teens or early 20's) when God called him to be a prophet. Following in the footsteps of his father as a priest would have been a far easier and predictable calling. Yet God called him to the ministry of a "prophet" and he initially challenged this lofty, divine and stressful calling, questioning if he was too young and inexperienced for such a responsibility.

Jeremiah had a difficult and lonely life. He was commanded by God not to marry or have children (16:1-4), because marriages and families were doomed to be destroyed. He was despised by the people of his hometown Anathoth, and they even tried to kill him; he often lamented his life and calling to ministry, even cursing the day of his birth; his messages from God were constantly opposed by all the false prophets; the kings to whom he spoke did not believe him; he was imprisoned for long periods of time; the first scroll containing his prophecies was cut up and thrown in the fire by King Jehoiakim; and he almost drowned when he was thrown into a cistern full of mud. Fortunately, a courageous man named Ebed-Melech, rescued him at the risk of his own life (38:4-13). Jeremiah was eventually taken to Egypt against his will by the remnant who survived the Babylonian invasion, still choosing to trust in another nation rather than God. He also wrote the book of Lamentations, and has earned the name, "The Weeping Prophet."

In the first part of our two-part survey of Jeremiah we will focus on several of the 'pictures' (parables) that God gave him to deliver his message to the nation. But before we look at the pictures, let's look at his call to ministry in the opening chapter of the book.

Jeremiah's call to Ministry: Ch.1

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:4-10).

There are several things to note here: 1) God had set Jeremiah apart for his life's work even before he was conceived. 2) His age did not matter because God was with him to support him. 3) His words were given to him by God, thus authoritative and true. 4) His message and ministry would impact the rise and fall of many nations, not just his own beloved Israel and Judah. At the end of ch.1 we see God calling his chosen servant to arise and courageously enter into his calling as God's mouthpiece:

"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD (1:17-19).

Jeremiah would later need this assuring word from God, because he would indeed be opposed by the kings, officials, priests, false prophets and the people of the land. Yet, **Jeremiah + God** would be a **majority**- strong enough to overcome any opposition.

God calls everyone to believe in Him as Creator and Savior (through Christ), with an amazing journey with Him planned for those who believe in Him. Jeremiah had a tender heart that could represent the heart of God. The downside was that his heart was easily discouraged, even doubting God's goodness; being tempted to not be firm when needed. How has God wired you? How is your unique life an opportunity to be a channel of God's love and truth in a world that desperately needs to hear about Him? Ask Him to show you His plans that He has for you (Jer. 29:11).

Pictures from Jeremiah

All the prophets used pictures, metaphors and living illustrations to declare their God-given messages. Jeremiah is particularly vivid in the way he depicted God's word. We will explore a few of his pictures, and then give a broader list at the end of this lesson.

1) Broken Cisterns – Ch.2

“Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (2:10-13).

In ancient Israel, the people dug large holes in the ground to capture and retain water. Villages had large cisterns for community use, while individuals dug smaller home cisterns. In dry seasons, the cisterns might crack causing them to lose water.

God's people were turning to false gods and to other nations for help overcoming their problems. They had “*exchanged God*” for idols that were “*not gods at all.*” In doing so, they were relying on “*broken cisterns that could hold no water.*” At the same time, they were failing to rely on God who is a “*spring of living water*” (a spring that perpetually bubbles up from the ground with a never-ending supply of clean, fresh water).

JESUS used similar language when speaking with the Samaritan woman he met at a well (John 4). She had been digging her own “broken cisterns,” trying to find fulfillment in relationships with men; yet, she remained unsatisfied. Jesus told her: “*Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*” (John 4:14).

Every one of us is prone to seek our fulfillment in finances, status, education, success, athletics, promotions, health, beauty or relationships. Yet, nothing on this earth can satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. God has made us in His image, to know and relate to Him, regardless of our status or lot in life. Therefore, filling the God-shaped hole with some earthly shaped ambition or person, will never satisfy us. Ask God to reveal the “broken cisterns” that you are digging.

2) Fallow Ground – Ch.4

This is what the LORD says to the people of Judah and to Jerusalem: “Break up your fallow ground and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or my wrath will flare up and burn like fire because of the evil you have done—burn with no one to quench it” (4:3,4).

“Fallow” ground is land that has been left untilled for a season. While lying fallow, the ground hardens over. Although ‘fallow’ gives the impression that the field is just ‘neutral’, the truth is that weeds and thistles will grow up through the hard ground without any assistance. Thus, when the time comes to plant, the farmer must take two steps to prepare the land: 1) He must break up the hardened soil, and 2) remove any weeds that may have sprouted during the time the land remained untilled. If either of these steps is not taken, then the harvest from that ground will be ruined.

Like fallow ground, the hearts of God’s people had become hardened and unreceptive to His word. Weeds of lies concerning where their hope and strength was to be found continually caused them to be led astray. For some 700 years, God had implored His people to break up the fallow ground (soften their hearts) so that the “seed of His word” could penetrate and bear fruit. Now, one last time through Jeremiah, God pleaded with His people to stop being hard-hearted. Similarly, God implored them to NOT sow among thorns that could choke out God’s word – thorns such as devotion to other gods, unbelief, worldly cares, etc.

Jesus’ parable of the 4 soils (4 kinds of hearts) repeats themes from Jeremiah (Mark 4). Jesus spoke of hardened soil that cannot receive God’s word; of thorn-infested soil that chokes out the fruit of God’s word; of rocky soil that is too shallow to receive the word deeply; and good soil that receives the word and bears much fruit.

Whether through Jeremiah or Jesus, each of us is challenged to examine the receptivity and ‘soil quality’ of our own heart. Perhaps at an earlier time of life our heart was more tender and responsive to God’s word. Now we have allowed weeds and thistles to infest our view of Him and His heart for the world. We don’t long for Him and have receptive ears that hear and a heart that responds like before. God challenges each of us to break up and weed out the hardened soil of our heart and once again long for His love and life to be planted and bear fruit in our heart.

3) The Crossroads – Ch.6

This is what the LORD says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it’” (6:16).

We have all had the experience of coming to a fork in the road where we must decide which way to turn. Today, we have navigation devices that will tell us the best way to go. The goal of these navigation tools is to help us have the safest, quickest and most satisfying journey possible. In ancient times, when a traveler came to a fork in the road and did not know which way to turn, the “navigation device” was to ask someone there, with knowledge and experience, which way to go.

God implores His people, Israel, to stand at the crossroads of life and to ask for “the ancient paths,” the “good way,” and to walk in that path. The “ancient paths” would refer to the paths of faith and obedience walked by people like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Miriam, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Hannah, David, and many others. God assures His people that if they *ask* and then *heed the advice given*, they will “find rest for their souls” on the journey of life.

God had sent Israel many, many prophets (like Jeremiah) to point people down the right path, the path leading to rest. But the people of Israel would not heed the wise guidance given by the prophets: *But you said, “We will not walk in it.”*

In words very reminiscent of Jeremiah, JESUS stood at the crossroads of life and offered a path to people that would lead to “rest for their souls.”

“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

From whom do you seek advice? Do you have trusted people who follow God’s wisdom, who can pray with you and guide you in God’s ways? Many turn to social media, books, articles or talk show hosts, or news commentators... much wisdom can be gained from secular sources, yet ultimately the advice given needs to be guided by and weighed against God’s truth and the wisdom of those further along in life’s journey. Who are your mentors and how are you filling your mind with God’s truth to guide you in your quest for direction at the crossroads of life?

4) Bush in the desert, or tree by the stream – Ch.17

This is what the LORD says: “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the desert; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit” (17:5-8).

Ultimately, our life is to be shaped by our level of *trust (faith, confidence)* that we have in God. Israel had a consistent pattern of failing to trust God’s character – His goodness, love and plan for their lives – and turning instead to other gods or sources of hope (alliances with other nations). God says to Israel that trusting in anyone or anything but Him leads to a life that is like a bush in the desert – dry, wearying, fruitless and dying. Israel had been experiencing the *bush in the desert life* for many centuries due to their failure to trust God and walk in obedience to His words. Yet whenever they would place their complete confidence in God, His character and His words, they would experience the blessed life that God had promised- a strong, stable, enduring and fruitful life

The same principle is true for us today. The richness of our life is found in the roots of our faith and obedience growing ever deeper into the constant flowing stream of God’s life. Like the branches that are connected solidly into the thick grape vine (John ch. 15), the sap can flow continuously into our ‘veins’ if our roots are growing deep into the life-giving streams of God’s life. No matter what season of life we are walking through, we can still bear fruit of His hope and peace and supernatural joy. It is a much deeper and abiding fruit that carries us beyond our circumstances.

and blessed nation.

Note: This parable from Jeremiah bears a striking resemblance to Psalm 1, where the “blessed man” is depicted as a tree planted by living water that bears much fruit and remains healthy in all seasons. The blessed man is contrasted with the “wicked man” who is depicted as chaff blown away by the wind. The only major difference is that Psalm 1 focuses on *delighting in God’s word*, while Jeremiah 17:5-8 focuses on *trusting in God alone*.

5) Two Baskets of Figs – Ch.24

The most controversial aspect of Jeremiah's message was that the Babylonian captivity *was God's judgment and therefore the people should willingly surrender willingly to Babylon*. Jeremiah was branded a traitor for this message. Yet, God saw it like this:

The LORD showed me two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple of the LORD. One basket had very good figs, like those that ripen early; the other basket had very bad figs, so bad they could not be eaten . . . This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: "Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land . . . But like the bad figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten," says the LORD, "so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them. I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their ancestors" (24:2-10).

The "good figs" were those who would submit to God's discipline and go willingly into captivity to Babylon. God would bless and protect His people there. The "bad figs" were those who would rebel against His divine discipline and choose instead to flee to Egypt. They will suffer even worse discipline there. In the Book of Lamentations, Jeremiah spoke about accepting God's discipline:

"It is good for people to submit at an early age to the yoke of His discipline: Let them sit alone in silence beneath the LORD's demands . . . For no one is abandoned by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He also shows compassion because of the greatness of His unfailing love" (Lamentations 3:27-32).

Sometimes what God is asking of us can seem 'counter-intuitive'. The Israelites, who really listened to the reason behind God's way, and were willing to submit to it, even not fully understanding it all, were saved and protected, even during the Babylonian captivity. We too can "walk by faith" when the pressure to go our own way, or someone else's way for us seems to make more sense. This takes an enormous amount of trust in God and His faithfulness, and the wisdom of those we go to for advice. Be willing to go against the tide and take some heat at times! Jesus certainly did. Jeremiah did too. You will be in good company.

Additional Pictures from Jeremiah

There are many more pictures in Jeremiah. Here are a few more (without the Scripture passages):

The Ruined Underwear – Ch.13

Jeremiah had to wear some “underwear” and then go bury it in Babylon until it was ruined, then dig it up and show it to Israel! Just as the “linen belt” clung to a man’s waist, so God had bound Israel close to Himself in a covenant relationship. But Israel did not cling to God; rather, they turned to other gods. Thus, they would go into captivity in Babylon (by the Euphrates, where Jeremiah buried his underwear) and their glory would be ruined.

The Potter’s Vessel – Ch.18

Jeremiah watched a potter making a clay pot. He saw the pot ruined and then reshaped by the potter. Just as the potter has authority over the clay to mold any kind of vessel he desires, so God can fashion calamity *or* rescue for His people. It is His divine prerogative, depending on what He sees in the hearts of His people. If His people humble themselves and turn back to Him, He will bring them blessing instead of calamity.

God’s Council – Ch.23

God depicts a council meeting with His prophets. In the council of the Lord, He gives each of them His messages that He wants delivered to His people. Yet, the false prophets speak without first sitting in God’s council to receive His words! They speak only from their own visions and the imaginations of their own hearts (and for the sake of their own selfish gain). Thus, God will bring harsh judgments down upon the prophets who harm people by speaking only their own thoughts.

Jeremiah’s Yoke – Ch.27,28

God told Jeremiah to wear a yoke around his neck (like the yoke used to harness an animal for work) as a sign that the people should accept the yoke of Babylonian authority over them for the 70 years and leave their land willingly. A false prophet named Hananiah broke Jeremiah’s yoke in the presence of the people, as if to say: “We will escape from the Babylonians.” God sent Jeremiah with a special message for Hananiah: “*You have broken the yoke of wood and made a yoke of iron instead*” (28:13)! That same year, Hananiah died for making the people trust in a lie!

Purchased Field – Ch.32

Jeremiah remained in prison, even as the Babylonians laid siege to the city under king Zedekiah. At this time, God told Jeremiah to buy a field from his uncle's son, which he did. Jeremiah had Baruch bury the deed for the land in a container in the field, with full assurance that someday the people would return to that very land and could claim their inheritance. Jeremiah prays a long prayer worshipping God for this promise of a future. God responds to his prayer, confirming both the reason for the impending judgment *and* the certainty of their future hope.

Sun and Moon – Ch.33

God remains faithful, even if His people are faithless. He will fulfill His promises. The future will be glorious, and God's righteous King will reign over Israel. The fulfillment of the Davidic covenant was promised to King David, that Messiah would be an eternal yet human king from his family line. This promise is as certain as the covenant (promise) God made to Noah (Genesis 8:22) that will bring each day with a rising sun and each night with a rising moon.

Jonadab and his faithful descendants – Ch.35

Jonadab the Rechabite had descendants for many generations who remained loyal to their father's vows. They were willing to abide by the commitment to not ever drink alcohol, or live in actual built homes, only tents. Both of those were common to the people of Israel, but this family was commanded to be different. God used this family to show the Israelites that if a family line was willing to be faithful to their ancestor's vows and heritage, then why couldn't God's children remain loyal to their vows and covenant to Him?

Discussion Questions

1. What stands out most to you concerning Jeremiah as a person – his life, his calling, his struggles, his emotions, etc.?
2. Of the many pictures from Jeremiah, which one grabs your attention the most? Why?
3. If you had to “picture” your relationship with God right now, how would you picture it? What analogy or parable would you use?

GOD WITH US

Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return *Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness*

Message 6 – Jeremiah: A Portrait of God

Introduction

The message of Jeremiah was painfully simple: Judah would go into captivity to Babylon because of disobedience to the covenant with Yahweh. Those who submitted to this divine discipline (i.e. surrender willingly to Babylon) would be protected and cared for by God. Those who refused to yield would face more severe consequences for their rebellion, no matter where they ran for protection. This was a very difficult message for Jeremiah to deliver, because the people wanted someone to bring them “better news.” As a result, Jeremiah was despised and persecuted by the people, priests, prophets and kings. It was also a painful message for Jeremiah to deliver because his natural disposition was such that he longed for the love and affection of his countrymen, which he never received. Thus, the “weeping prophet” served God’s purposes in his generation at great cost to himself.

In the previous section of our study we surveyed several of the most vivid pictures from the book of Jeremiah – pictures that summarize the message of God to His people. In our current study, we will look at the hearts of 3 main characters: Baruch, Jeremiah and God.

Baruch: Seeking the “great things” of God.

Very few people have a chapter of the Bible where God speaks directly and personally to their own heart. Baruch was one such person. A little background will help us understand God’s very personal message to this man.

Baruch was a young man of noble descent. He was Jeremiah’s personal assistant and scribe (secretary), the one responsible for writing down all the words of Jeremiah on scrolls.

“Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the LORD which He had spoken to him” (36:4).

Based on the time references (36:1 and 36:9) we can estimate that

it took Baruch roughly 1-1/2 years to record all that Jeremiah had said! After all of this scribal work, it was Baruch who read from Jeremiah's scroll of prophecies to the people, since Jeremiah was imprisoned and could not do so.

“So you go and read from the scroll which you have written at my dictation the words of the LORD to the people in the Lord’s house on a fast day” (36:6).

As we know, Jeremiah was hated by all, thus Baruch was also hated, by virtue of close connection to Jeremiah and his message. In fact, at one point the leaders accused Baruch of being the driving force behind Jeremiah's pro-Babylonian message! Here is what they said to Jeremiah:

“Baruch the son of Neriah is inciting you against us to give us over into the hand of the Babylonians, so they will put us to death or exile us to Babylon” (43:3).

Apparently, Baruch's stature in society was significant enough that he was regarded as a strong influence behind the message of Jeremiah. (Although this was not the case; it was God, not Baruch, who was “inciting” Jeremiah to speak).

After Baruch publicly read Jeremiah's prophecies at the temple to the people, he was summoned to the king's house to read the scroll to the court officials of king Jehoiakim. They were shocked at the dire prophecies and decided that the king must hear them himself. They told Baruch to go and hide himself, knowing that the king might seek to kill him after hearing the terrifying prophecies.

Then the officials said to Baruch, “Go, hide yourself, you and Jeremiah, and do not let anyone know where you are” (36:19).

As expected, Jehoiakim did not receive well the warnings and prophecies of Jeremiah. He took the scroll and cut it up in pieces as it was read, throwing the these into the fireplace! At the end, he commanded that Baruch and Jeremiah be arrested.

“And the king commanded Jerahmeel the king’s son, Seraiah the son of Azriel, and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel to seize Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet, but the LORD hid them” (36:26).

We do not know *how* “the Lord hid them” from the wrath of king Jehoiakim; but we do know what the Lord told Jeremiah and Baruch to do during this period of hiding. They were to take

another scroll and re-write *all the same prophecies* along with *many more words* (a long and painstaking task).

“Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to Baruch the son of Neriah, the scribe, and he wrote on it at the dictation of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them” (36:32).

We can assume that the time it took to make a new scroll exceeded the time for the first scroll, since many more words were added. This mean that Baruch gave **more that 3 years** to writing the words of Jeremiah.

With this background, we can better understand the heart and tone behind God’s personal message to Baruch, which came to him as he was painstakingly rewriting all the words of Jeremiah on another scroll. The message came from God through Jeremiah:

This is the message which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he had written down these words in a book at Jeremiah’s dictation, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying: “Thus says the LORD the God of Israel to you, O Baruch: ‘You said, “Ah, woe is me! For the LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning and have found no rest”” (45:1-3).

First, we note that *God saw the inner sorrows and longings* of this man, Baruch. He saw that Baruch was burdened by the fact that his last scroll (1-1/2 years work) had been burned by the king. His work seemed wasted. And now he was sitting in some lonely hiding place (an additional 1-1/2+ years) writing another scroll, with many *more words*. Baruch was weary with his groaning . . . and he had found no rest.

How encouraging it is to see that GOD KNOWS the deepest longings and struggles of our hearts. He knows us intimately and fully. He knows our every thought before we even put words to those thoughts. God wants us to bring all our deepest and most painful emotions into relationship with Him. He cares for us. He understands us. And He has plans for each of us, even in our darkest, most pain-filled days.

Second, we note that *God had a specific message for Baruch, to strengthen him and give him the courage to continue on.*

Thus you are to say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Behold, what I have built I am about to tear down, and what I have planted I am about to uproot, that is, the whole land.” But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I am going to bring disaster on all flesh,’ declares the LORD, ‘but I will give your life to you as booty in all the places where you may go’” (45:4,5).

God asked Baruch a very searching question: “*Are you seeking great things for yourself?*” We may well imagine that Baruch *was questioning* the value of his life and his work with Jeremiah and *was tempted to seek something better* for his life. After all, he was born into a *noble* family; yet he seemed to be doing such ignoble work. Should he not, along with his friends, be pursuing great plans for his future? Instead, he was hiding away with a hated prophet re-writing Hebrew words that might just end up in the fireplace like the previous words. He questioned his place in the world, and in the plans of God. Wasn’t there something better?

God gave Baruch a very clear answer: *Don’t long for a high position in a doomed kingdom!* The nation was about to be destroyed and all its leaders would either die or go into captivity in chains. All of Baruch’s peers, those young nobles pursuing “great plans” for themselves, would see those plans come to *nothing*. But Baruch would be granted life “*in all the places where he would go.*” God would protect and provide for his servant. (God did not mention the fact that this second longer scroll would survive and become one of the greatest books in human history!)

What is SUCCESS? Success is doing the will of God regardless of the results. We can pursue that version of success no matter who we are or where we are. We simply need to ask the question: God, how can I serve You faithfully today, right where You have me? A mother who is called to be at home raising a family can be just as faithful a servant of God as a missionary serving on a foreign field. The key is NOT succumbing to the temptation to “pursue great things for ourselves,” rather, to pursue the great things that God wants to do with us – to be faithful to His assignments, big or small, tedious or exciting.

The last mention of Baruch shows him being dragged to Egypt along with Jeremiah (against their will) by those who stubbornly refused to heed God’s command not to go there.

“And they took Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah along with them. So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the LORD and went as far as Tahpanhes” (43:6,7).

Baruch remained faithful to God’s challenge. He remained loyal to Jeremiah, no matter the cost to himself. God protected them both, even in Egypt!

Baruch is an example of a younger man being a faithful servant to an older man. Joshua was the faithful servant to Moses, yet with a very different calling. Young Timothy came alongside the aged apostle Paul. John Mark was a servant and helper to the apostle Peter. Some of these “minor characters” ended up playing “major roles” in the story of God (even though this was not clear to them at the time). How does Baruch’s life inspire you to be faithful? What has God given you to do at the present time? Remember – Success is defined by your faithfulness, not the prominence of your role.

Jeremiah: Tender and Tough

“Woe to me, my mother, that you have borne me as a man of strife and a man of contention to all the land” (15:10).

Jeremiah was an unusual prophet. He was very tender-hearted, thus he *felt his message* at a very deep level (which made it very difficult to deliver his message over many decades). His heart was desperately sick over the spiritual condition of his people. He was as broken *emotionally* as they were broken *spiritually*.

“My sorrow is beyond healing, my heart is faint within me . . . For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored” (8:18-22)?

Gilead was a place in Israel known for its production of healing ointments, and physicians worked there. Yet, Jeremiah was unable to find a *“balm in Gilead”* that could heal the peoples’ sick hearts. He could not find a doctor that could restore the health of his people. Not even his own words seemed effective in calling the people back to God, their true healer. Thus, his own sorrow was *“beyond healing.”*

Because of his calling to be the mouthpiece of God, Jeremiah was constantly caught between two deep, driving forces: 1) He was

compelled to faithfully pour forth the difficult words of God to his people; yet 2) he deeply desired the affection and friendship of his people, which he was continually denied *because of his God-given message*. He was labeled at “traitor,” even though he was the ultimate “patriot” in his heart of hearts. Thus, Jeremiah often felt abandoned by both God and man. Two of Jeremiah’s “laments” highlight this tension in his heart between his God-given calling (to bear a tough message) and his natural disposition (to be tender-hearted).

“Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts. I did not sit in the circle of merry-makers, nor did I exult. Because of Your hand upon me I sat alone, for You filled me with indignation. Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Your help seems as uncertain as a seasonal brook, like a spring that has gone dry” (15:16-18)?

Notice his obedience to the call of God to be His messenger. He made sacrifices, especially in terms of his friendships, in order to remain faithful to his calling. Yet, this resulted in loneliness and great emotional pain. At times, he felt as if he had been ‘tricked’ by God into this calling.

“O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, because for me the word of the LORD has resulted in reproach and derision all day long. But if I say, “I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,” then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it. For I have heard the whispering of many, “Terror on every side! Denounce him; yes, let us denounce him!” All my trusted friends, watching for my fall, say: “Perhaps he will be deceived, so that we may prevail against him and take our revenge on him” (20:7-10).

I am so glad that the Bible does not gloss over the more difficult and even weak moments of its greatest characters. Here we see Jeremiah lamenting the pain that God’s calling was producing in his life. As a result, God had to call his chosen prophet to “repent” (i.e., reaffirm and recommit to his calling to serve God in spite of

his feelings to the contrary).

Therefore, thus says the LORD, “If you return, then I will restore you—before Me you will stand; and if you extract the precious from the worthless, you will become My spokesman. They for their part may turn to you, but as for you, you must not turn to them. Then I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; and though they fight against you, they will not prevail over you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you,” declares the LORD. “So I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem you from the grasp of the violent” (15:19-21).

The record of Jeremiah’s life tells us that he *did* keep *repenting* (returning to the Lord) in spite of his tremendous struggles with his calling. His life became more and more difficult as the nation moved closer and closer to the Babylonian invasion; but he did not give up. Indeed, God made this gentle man a “*fortified wall of bronze*” that the opposing forces could not prevail against.

It is encouraging to see that God can use a man like Jeremiah to do the great work that he did. God can use any of us, if we yield our lives to His purposes. Yes, living out God’s plan may be difficult and may stretch us to our limits; but God will be faithful to carry us through whatever He calls us to do. Are you holding back on yielding fully to God because you are afraid that you are not capable of fulfilling His calling? When you fully yield to God and allow Him to work in and through you, you will be truly amazed to learn that He “is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Ephesians 3:20).

Why did God choose such a tender-hearted man like Jeremiah to bear such a tough message of judgment? Probably because the *heart of this man best reflected the heart of God Himself: tender and tough. God incarnated His message in the messenger.* The personality of Jeremiah humanly depicted the heart and emotions of God – passionately zealous for His people, yet righteously possessive of His ransomed jewel. As every parent learns, no matter how passionate the parental love, inevitable discipline must come if constant warnings and chances are rejected. Jeremiah represented the heartfelt struggle of God . . . between His deep desire to lovingly restore His people to Himself, and His need to discipline His people for their refusal to return to Him.

It should not surprise us that there were so many similarities between Jeremiah and Jesus that *many people thought Jesus was Jeremiah reincarnated!* (See Matt.16:13,14). Warren Wiersbe points out many of the parallels: *“The ministries of both Jeremiah and Jesus were rejected by the people and both men wept over the city of Jerusalem because they knew that destruction was coming. Both were hated without cause and both were ridiculed by the leaders. Jeremiah was rejected by his family, and Jesus by His family. Both emphasized a ‘heart religion’ and not just ritual, and both taught by means of visual images and used common objects and activities to instruct the people. Jeremiah ended up in Egypt and Jesus on a Roman cross. In their day, both were considered miserable failures, but history has proved that both were right.”*

God: With all My heart and all My soul!

It is fascinating to see two very different sides of the character of God as revealed through the life and ministry of Jeremiah. On the one hand, we see the tremendous *love of God* for His people. On the other hand, we see the *justice of God* in that He will no longer allow His people to blatantly and stubbornly rebel against Him.

Throughout the book there are passages that reveal God’s deep emotions:

Thus says the LORD, “I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the first of His harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them,” declares the LORD” (2:1-3).

God loved Israel so much that He would fiercely protect her against all who would seek to “devour her.” She was precious in His sight!

Yet, God reveals deep sadness that His precious bride has forgotten Him, not even recalling her bridal attire.

“Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number” (2:32).

But this bride has done more than “forgetting” her husband; she has treacherously departed and run off with other lovers.

“You said, ‘It is hopeless! For I have loved strangers, and I must go after them’” (2:25).

“Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD . . . They have forgotten the LORD their God” (3:20,21).

Nevertheless, even at this late hour God still pleads to His bride to return to Him so that He can forgive and restore her to Himself.

“Return, faithless Israel,” declares the LORD, “I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,” declares the LORD, “I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,” declares the LORD. “Return, faithless people,” declares the LORD, “for I am your husband” (3:12-14).

But she will not return to Him. Although God expresses deep anguish over His decision, He asks three times the same question:

“Should I not punish them for this?” declares the LORD. “Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this? (5:9; 9:9; 9:29).

With great sadness, God gives His beloved over to plunderers who will ruin her. The coming Babylonian invasion is described in vivid terms that sent horror into the hearts of Jeremiah’s audience:

“Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem: ‘Sound the trumpet throughout the land!’ Cry aloud and say: ‘Gather together! Let us flee to the fortified cities!’ Raise the signal to go to Zion! Flee for safety without delay! For I am bringing disaster from the north, even terrible destruction. A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out. He has left his place to lay waste your land. Your towns will lie in ruins without inhabitant. So put on sackcloth, lament and wail, for the fierce anger of the LORD has not turned away from us. “In that day,” declares the LORD, “the king and the officials will lose heart, the priests will be horrified, and the prophets will be appalled” (4:5-9).

Sadly, Israel was given over to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. due to centuries of stubborn refusal to heed the terms of their covenant with Yahweh. Yet, this 70-year captivity in Babylon was *not the final word from Jeremiah concerning God’s plan for His people.*

“They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion; they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD—the grain, the new wine

and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds. They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well. I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow” (31:10-14).

“Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take. Return, Virgin Israel, return to your towns. How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel? The LORD will create a new thing on earth—the woman will return to the man” (31:21,22).

Yes, the day of divine discipline was coming upon God’s unfaithful bride, Israel. But because of God’s unfailing love, there were brighter days ahead. This future hope caused Jeremiah not only to be the weeping prophet, but also the hopeful prophet, and to utter these famous lines in his book of Lamentations:

“I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him. The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lamentations 3:19-26).

God IS faithful to His covenant promises. This means that He is faithful *both* to bless us in our obedience *and* to discipline us in our disobedience. Jeremiah would live to see Israel destroyed. But in his visions and his prophecies, he saw Israel being restored by the hand of his all-merciful God.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the biggest lesson that you took away from the life of Baruch?
2. What is the biggest lesson that you took away from the life of Jeremiah?
3. How does Jeremiah’s message about God’s hand of judgment and discipline impact you?
4. How does Jeremiah’s message about God’s faithfulness and mercy encourage you?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 7 – Habakkuk: Questions for God

Introduction

Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, lived and ministered in the years prior to the Babylonian invasion of Judah. However, Habakkuk was not primarily concerned with *forecasting* the judgment of God upon the nation. Rather, he was “the questioning prophet,” asking God questions about how/when He would deal with injustice, both within Judah and in the wider world. The first two chapters of the Book of Habakkuk are composed in a dialogue form where Habakkuk poses questions and God answers. The final chapter is a responsive prayer intended for use in public worship. The core issue that Habakkuk was wrestling with was the *justice of God in light of the presence of unchecked evil in the world*. Many of us struggle with the same question today. Why does God allow so much evil to go unchecked? When will He act to confront evil and stop it? Habakkuk gives us *some* answers while inviting us to *live by faith* in the character of our holy and just God.

Question 1: Why does God allow evil to exist in Judah? 1:1-4

The question/answer format makes Habakkuk unique among the prophets. The opening question has to do with his troubling observation that *evil seemed to be going unchecked in his own country of Judah*. He felt as if God was being complacent in allowing such evil to continue.

“How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” (1:2,3)

Answer 1: Here come the Babylonians! 1:5-11

God assured Habakkuk that He would punish the evil in Judah. He was raising up the Babylonians as His rod of discipline. A description of the Babylonians is given (1:6-10) with emphasis on their terrifying fierceness. This struck fear in the heart of Habakkuk (see 3:16).

“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own” (1:5,6).

It is encouraging to see that God welcomed and answered the deep questions of Habakkuk. It is good to bring our deepest questions and doubts to God in prayer. We may not receive a direct answer as the prophet did; but God hears our sincere questions and prayers and He chooses to answer us in His own time and His own way. Habakkuk did not particularly like God's answer that the Babylonians were being raised up to punish Judah for its wickedness (see below). But the point is that God does have His way of dealing with both our questions and the issues involved in those questions. If we ask God sincere questions about the things that concern us, we must also allow Him to answer however He pleases, even if His answer leaves us “utterly amazed,” as it did Habakkuk!

Question 2: Aren't they more evil than we are? 1:12-2:1

God's answer solved one problem but raised another. How could God punish evil in Judah by using a nation that was *more evil* than Judah? The Babylonians had no regard for Yahweh whatsoever. They were idolaters who “*offered sacrifices to their nets*” (i.e., they worshipped their military prowess and their ‘gods of war’). How could a holy and just God use such evil people as His instruments of discipline upon the people of Judah?

“You, LORD, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (1:12,13).

Answer 2: God will judge the Babylonians also! 2:2-20

Habakkuk waited for an answer (2:1) and was rewarded with a vision from God. He was told to “*record the vision on tablets*” The vision is *certain to be fulfilled*, even if not immediately. God's future judgment on the haughty Babylonian empire is depicted (2:4-17). The futility of their idol worship is called out and set in contrast to the supreme dignity of Yahweh (2:18-20).

“Because you (Babylonians) have plundered many nations, the

peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed human blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them” (2:8).

You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and let your nakedness be exposed! The cup from the LORD’s right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory” (2:16).

The vision of ch.2 ends with a definitive statement concerning the sovereignty of God over *all the affairs of men and nations*:

“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (2:20).

There is no injustice that escapes the notice of God. When He raised up foreign nations to discipline His people, Israel, He was watching very closely to see if they went one inch further than He intended for them to go. There are many passages in the Old Testament where God brings condemnation upon Israel’s neighbors for “going too far.” The Lord watches everything from His holy temple. Perhaps you have suffered some injustice at the hands of people or institutions. Take heart – God sees, God knows, and God will call them to account. All the earth will be silent in the courtroom of God’s all-seeing justice.

Note: **Habakkuk 2:4b** is quoted 3 times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). ***“But the righteous person will live by faith” (2:4b).*** Each time it is quoted, it is used to point to an unchanging principle in the way that God requires us to relate with Him: *Faith (trust) in Him is always the basis for right standing before Him.*

Responsive Prayer, Vision and Confidence: 3:1-19

The musical notations at the beginning and end of this section indicate that it was intended for use in public worship. Verse 2 is a short prayer uttered by Habakkuk in response to the revelation God has given concerning the future. The prayer reflects a humble submission to the sovereign will of God, as well as a plea that God remember mercy in the midst of judgment.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth. “LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy” (3:1,2).

Habakkuk then experienced a vision where God was seen intervening powerfully on behalf of His people, Israel. The vision evokes memories of Israel's exodus out of Egypt. A future redemption is pictured under figures from a past redemption.

“Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear. In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one” (3:11-13).

Habakkuk was terrified both by the vision and by the reminder that the Babylonian invasion was imminent. He determined to wait for the unfolding plan of God's justice (and mercy) for all nations.

***“I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.”
For the director of music. On my stringed instruments (3:16-19).***

The book of Habakkuk has come full circle. It began with questions and doubts, and ends on a note of sublime confidence in the wisdom and sovereignty of God. The circumstances of life had not changed, but the perspective of Habakkuk had changed as a result of his dialogue and encounter with God. Though a terrifying judgment is impending, he determined to “exult in the Lord” and to “rejoice in the God of his salvation” (3:18). The justice of God will ultimately prevail throughout the whole world.

Discussion Questions

1. If you could ask God one question right now, what would it be?
2. The *situation did not change* for Habakkuk; but his *perspective changed*. What has Habakkuk taught you about seeking God's perspective when things seem unclear to you?
3. We see a lot of seemingly unchecked evil in our world today. How does the book of Habakkuk impact the way you view such evil in our world? What hope does his message give to you?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 8 – Daniel: His life and prophecies

Introduction

Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon captured Jerusalem in the 3rd year of Jehoiakim king of Judah (2Kings 24:1-4; Dan.1:1), at which time many Jews were taken into captivity, including the young man Daniel. What makes the life, ministry and message of Daniel unique is that he lived and spoke entirely from within the context of captivity in Babylon. We see a devout young Jewish man navigating how to live out his faith and convictions in a climate entirely hostile and opposed to his beliefs, morals and convictions. Further, when Daniel saw visions of the future and made prophecies, he spoke not just to the future of Israel, but to the wider future of nations and kingdoms that would rise and fall throughout human history (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, etc.) all the way to the day when *God will set up His kingdom on earth*. In fact, the central section of Daniel (2:4 – 7:28) was written in Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian empire. Thus, Daniel gives us the broadest picture of human history of any O.T. prophet. His prophecies have been called “the key to understanding biblical prophecy.” In particular, there are many parallels between Daniel’s visions of the future and those found in the book of Revelation, the final book in the Bible.

The first 6 chapters of the book of Daniel focus more on the life and faith of Daniel and his 3 friends in a culture opposed to their beliefs. We see the sovereign hand of God in allowing certain events that tested the faith and convictions of these men, and we see the responsible choices of human beings, as they responded in faith, prayer and courage to the tests that God allowed.

Daniel’s Training in Babylon: Ch.1

After taking many Jews captive, Nebuchadnezzar took the most promising Jewish youths, including Daniel and 3 of his friends who were all of noble decent, and began to ‘convert them’ to the culture and practices of Babylon. Along with his 3 friends, Daniel found himself in a 3-year curriculum of study in the culture, language and literature of Babylon. They were given names that reflected the Babylonian deities, and food from the king’s table. Daniel, however, would not eat the king’s food, possibly because it had been used in

worship rituals to pagan deities, or because it went against the dietary laws of Judaism of that time period.

“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way” (1:9).

The chief official feared for his own life if Daniel did not eat the assigned food and the king saw his appearance declining.

“Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would have my head because of you” (1:10).

Daniel boldly but respectfully proposed a “test” for 10 days. He and his 3 friends would restrict their diet to vegetables and water. Then, their appearance would be compared to the other youths. God blessed Daniel and his friends so that at the end of the 10-day test their appearance was *better* than the rest of the group. And at the end of 3-year training period, king Nebuchadnezzar found Daniel and his friends to be ‘at the top of their class’ of students.

“The king . . . found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah . . . he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom” (1:19,20).

We see a theme here that will appear repeatedly in the book of Daniel: Staying TRUE to one’s CONVICTIONS and letting GOD dictate the OUTCOME. One reason we often compromise our convictions is because we are afraid of the possible outcomes – rejection, mockery, hostility, suffering, isolation, etc. Compromise is the attempt to control the outcomes to suit our own desires. Daniel and his friends consistently remained true to their convictions (in spite of great pressure to compromise) regardless of what outcome God might allow to come to them (and they firmly believed that God, not man, was in control of the outcome). Is there some area in your life right now where you are compromising your convictions because you are afraid of the possible outcome of staying true to your convictions?

Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream: Ch.2

Daniel’s status in Babylon rose even higher after he successfully told what King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was about, and then interpreted it when no other wise man could. Daniel praised God for giving him the wisdom to see *and* interpret the king’s dream.

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are His. He changes times and seasons; He deposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the

discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things; He knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with Him. I thank and praise You, God of my ancestors: You have given me wisdom and power, You have made known to me what we asked of You. You have made known to us the dream of the king” (2:20-23).

In the dream, the king saw a large statue with various parts. Daniel interpreted this as a vision of the future kingdoms of the world.

- **Head of gold:** Babylonian kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar.
- **Chest and arms of silver:** Medo-Persian kingdom.
- **Thighs of bronze:** Greek kingdom of Alexander the Great.
- **Legs of iron:** Roman kingdom. (Christ came during this period.)
- **Feet of iron & clay:** Final kingdom of mankind in the last days.
- **Rock that smashes the statue:** God’s eternal kingdom.

After explaining the dream, Daniel gave his God all the glory:

“The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy” (2:45).

Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to the highest of positions:

“Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men” (2:48).

Daniel’s friends refuse to worship the King’s statue: Ch.3

Perhaps inspired by his dream of the great statue, Nebuchadnezzar had a 90-foot tall golden statue set up (either a statue of himself or of Nebo, the chief Babylonian deity). This may have been Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to say that his Babylonian kingdom would *endure forever*, contrary to Daniel’s interpretation of his previous dream (i.e., that the Babylonian kingdom would be followed by many others that would overtake it). He commanded all the people to bow in worship before the gold statue. Daniel’s 3 friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow in worship. (Daniel apparently was not present.)

“King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and He will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if He does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (3:16-18).

The 3 men were thrown into the fire, but to the astonishment of the king and all the onlookers, a 4th “person” appeared with them.

He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods” (3:25).

Whether it was an angelic being (archangels Michael and Gabriel both appear later in Daniel) or God, the point is that *God protected His servants through their trial*. As a result, the 3 men were promoted to even higher positions in the province of Babylon.

“Even if” kind of faith trusts God no matter what He determines the outcome to be. The 3 men believed that God would be faithful to take care of them, “even if” He chose not to rescue them from the flames; but to take them through the flames into their heavenly home. Is there some area of your life where God is calling you to exercise “even if” faith? Another practical lesson here has to do with your friendship circle. These 3 friends stood together through the trials of living out their convictions in Babylon. They encouraged each other by the strength of their “even if faith.” Who are the friends who strengthen and encourage you to choose to honor God when the tests are hard?

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the fallen tree: Ch.4

Daniel was again asked to interpret a dream for Nebuchadnezzar – this time about a tree being felled. Daniel bravely told the king the meaning: His sovereign rule would be taken away from him for 7 years, due to PRIDE, and he would be stricken with a disease that would cause him to wander around like a wild animal.

“This is the interpretation, Your Majesty, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times (years) will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone He wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue” (4:24-27).

God waited patiently for one whole year, giving the king ample time to examine his heart of pride and acknowledge that “God on High” had given him his divine place of power; but Nebuchadnezzar did not repent. He was stricken and became like an animal for 7 years. In the end, he regained his senses and gave glory to the Most High God:

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward

heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified Him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: 'What have You done?' Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything He does is right and all His ways are just. He is able to humble those who walk in pride" (4:34-37).

Pride (worship of self) is a repeated theme in the book of Daniel. It is one of the most serious sins, because it is an assertion of one's independence from God or, worse, the assertion that we are our own god and everyone needs to 'bow to us'. In contrast, humility and dependence upon God are qualities that He approves of most. When we become proud, God will often move to humble us. "He is able to humble those who walk in pride." Is there any area of your life where pride has crept in? Any area where you are not giving God the glory; rather, you are becoming proud of your own works such that you look down on others? Ask God to reveal to you any subtle areas of pride. "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1Peter 5:6).

King Belshazzar's pride and fall: Ch.5

Belshazzar ruled Babylon several decades after Nebuchadnezzar (he was likely his grandson). Daniel recorded just one incident involving Belshazzar, and it happened on the last night of his life. He was holding a feast for his nobles and he called for the sacred drinking vessels that his grandfather had taken *from Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem*. While the crowd was feasting and drinking (perhaps praising their gods using vessels dedicated to the worship of Yahweh) suddenly a hand appeared on the wall behind Belshazzar and wrote out the words: MENE – MENE – TEKEL – PARSIN. None of the king's wise men could interpret the words; but the queen reminded the king of Daniel's renown for interpreting dreams and visions during Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

Daniel arrived and recounted for Belshazzar how God had humbled his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. But the faith-journey of his ancestor had no impact upon Belshazzar's heart.

"But you, Belshazzar ... have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from His temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine

from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in His hand your life and all your ways” (5:22-23).

Finally, Daniel gave the interpretation of the words on the wall:

“MENE: God has NUMBERED the days of your reign and brought it to an end. TEKEL: You have been WEIGHED on the scales and found wanting. PERES: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and PERSIANS” (5:27,28).

Later that same night, Belshazzar was murdered and Darius the Mede assumed the throne.

*Why is it that we often fail to learn life lessons from those who have gone before us? Maybe it is because we are stubborn and must “touch the paint” ourselves. Or maybe we believe that the life experiences of others cannot substitute for our own real-life personal experiences (which is not true! Many kings we have studied chose to break the idol worship of their fathers). Take a moment to reflect upon your family tree (genogram). What trait, habit or experience would you definitely NOT want to carry on? To break the power of the past we must identify the patterns in the lives of those who have gone before us that we see in ourselves. In the book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Pete Scazzero calls this, “Going Back to Go Forward.” Have you taken the time to examine your past enough to know what “sins of the fathers” you need to avoid?*

Daniel in the lion’s den: Ch.6

Darius the new king recognized and respected the wisdom of Daniel, thus he appointed him as 1 of 3 leaders to rule over 120 governors. Daniel quickly distinguished himself among all the leaders, thus the king planned to make him the #1 leader over all. This made the other leaders jealous, so they sought grounds to accuse Daniel before Darius; but they could find no fault in him!

“We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God” (6:5).

They knew that Daniel prayed 3 times a day with his face toward Jerusalem, so they asked the king to sign a law stating that no one could pray to *any god or human but the king himself*, with the penalty of being thrown into the lion’s den (a terrifying and painful death). The king, unaware of their schemes against Daniel, signed the decree (and Daniel’s death warrant).

“Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before” (6:10).

The rest of the story is well-known. Daniel was thrown to the lions, but miraculously preserved by God. Not only was Daniel promoted to the #1 position; but God was magnified throughout the kingdom (and Daniel’s enemies ended up in the lion’s den).

Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth: “May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.” So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian (6:25-28).

Daniel continued his habit of prayer even after he knew the king’s decree had been signed. He feared God more than he feared man, and he would not budge on his convictions, regardless of the consequences. Daniel stood alone but had complete peace in his heart and mind. Is there some area in your life where God is calling you to stand firm for your convictions? Or, to strengthen and solidify your convictions on some issue? It is never easy to stand up for your convictions. The bottom line: we must fear God, rather than men (see Acts 5:29 where the apostles did this also).

Daniel’s dream of 4 beasts: Ch.7

The last 6 chapters focus on Daniel “the prophet” – his expansive visions and prophecies of the future. Ch.7 sets the stage with a far-reaching dream-vision. *“In this vision, Daniel learned about six different kingdoms: four of them kingdoms of this world, one of them the kingdom of Satan, and the last one the kingdom of Messiah” (Warren Wiersbe, O.T. Prophets, p.282).*

- **Lion:** (7:4) Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar (and son-Nabonidus and grandson Belshazzar.)
- **Bear:** (7:5) Medo-Persian Empire of Darius; Xerxes (husband of Esther, ruler of 127 provinces) and Cyrus.
- **Leopard:** (7:6) Greek Empire of Alexander the Great.
- **Terrifying beast w/10 horns:** (7:7,24) Roman Empire which eventually divided into 10 nations.
- **Boastful horn:** (7:8,11,12,21-26) The final 7-yr kingdom, ruled by a

man who is empowered by Satan himself- ‘the Anti-Christ’. He will rule against God Himself and all true believers, ‘saints’ (Jews and Gentiles). Satan himself, will rule the earth through this man for 7 years of ‘great tribulation’.

- **Kingdom of the “Son of Man”:** (7:13,14,27) God’s eternal rule (promised to king David in 2 Samuel 7:13,16).

Two things stand out in this vision. **First, the “son of man.”** Daniel saw a special person (*God the Son*), being given authority by God (*God the Father*), ‘*the Ancient of Days*’, to rule the world forever. He is referred to as “one like a son of man” (i.e., one having human likeness).

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (7:13-14).

Daniel saw **the Messiah** (the Christ) being granted divine authority to rule over the eternal kingdom of God. The phrase “*one like a son of man*” is used 82 times in the N.T. and became extremely important during the life and ministry of **Jesus**. Jesus used the title “Son of Man” to refer to Himself more than any other title. When Jesus used this title, He was NOT simply saying: “I am the son of a man” (i.e., Joseph). Rather, He was claiming to be the divine son of man that Daniel saw in his vision. This explains why the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy (a man, who was claiming to be GOD), when He quoted this very passage at His hearing before the Jewish Council (Matthew 26:63-65). They were all very familiar with Daniel’s vision and they knew Jesus was claiming to be THE Son of Man, THE Messiah, GOD the SON, appointed by GOD the FATHER to rule the world.

The second figure that stands out is the little horn that spoke boastfully. Daniel saw a beast with 10 horns (10 kings), but eventually one little horn arose, displacing 3 of the others and boasting of great things. This is a reference to **the Anti-Christ** who will arise in the last days to oppose God’s kingdom.

“The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three

kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people (true believers) and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time. But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him” (7:23-27).

Summary: A series of empires will rule the world, culminating in one incomparably great empire. One king will assert himself above all others as the “king of kings” (the Anti-Christ). For 3-1/2 years (‘a time, times and half a time’) he will blaspheme God and tyrannize God’s people. Many will be oppressed (and martyred) for their faith (7:25). But finally, he will be overthrown by God’s true “Christ” (Anointed One) Who will battle against and overcome the anti-Christ, and usher in the eternal kingdom of God. Note the similar description of the anti-Christ in Revelation ch.13.

Daniel’s vision of the ram and the goat: Ch.8

This vision focused on the world powers that impacted Israel in the centuries immediately following Daniel, therefore the main purpose of the vision was *Jewish-oriented*. It is unique because Daniel was given the specific meaning of the vision by the angel Gabriel (vv.15-27) so there is no doubt as to what future kingdoms are in view. (It was the angel Gabriel who later visited John the Baptist’s father [Lk 1:19] and Mary the mother of Jesus [Lk 1:26] to announce the arrival of the TRUE King!

- **A ram with 2 horns:** The Medo-Persian kingdom (king Cyrus and Darius 1).
- **A goat with 4 horns in place of 1:** The Greek kingdom, 1st under Alexander the Great; later divided by 4 of his generals.
- **A small horn becomes great:** Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria, who persecuted the Jews and desecrated the Jewish temple in 168 B.C.

Many bible scholars see a dual reference in the “small horn” of Daniel’s vision. Clear historical fulfillment happened in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, a Syrian king during the Roman Empire, who violently opposed the Jews. He sought to exterminate them and desecrated the Jewish temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar (168 B.C.). This happened historically during the 400 ‘silent’ years that the O.T. does not record, prior to the coming of Jesus Christ. Antiochus proclaimed himself to be “god” (Epiphanes means “manifestation”), but the Jews mockingly changed his name to Antiochus Epimanes (madman)! While Antiochus and his actions against the Jews were

the primary historical fulfillment, he was also a precursor of the “true” anti-Christ of the end times who will arise to oppose God’s people.

Daniel’s prayer and the answer: The 70 weeks prophecy Ch.9

9:4-19 Daniel had been studying the Scriptures (the scroll of Jeremiah that had been taken to the Babylonian captives), when he noticed that the length of captivity in Babylon had been specified as 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11,12). He began to fast from food and pray to God with great passion and confess his own sins and identify with the sins of his beloved people of Israel. He recounted the sins of his forefathers ever since God mercifully rescued them out of Egypt and brought them into the land of Canaan. He confessed the sins of his people abandoning their God for the false gods of the Canaanites, and rebelling against the laws that God had given to Moses. He pleaded with God to look on the desolation of their sacred city of Jerusalem, and though He was righteous, to extend mercy and forgiveness for His Name’s Sake.

While Daniel was humbly in prayer before God, the angel Gabriel appeared, bringing Daniel the interpretation of the 70 weeks.

“... while I was still in my prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me... ‘Daniel, I have come to give you understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed’ (9:21-23).

FASTING and PRAYER- Daniel humbly searched his own heart, and the heart of his fellow Jews. He confessed the sins of his forefathers. Going back into our family’s history and recognizing the sins that we have inherited, is essential. But taking it further by confessing them as our own as Daniel did, can usher the mercy and forgiveness and movement of God. Do you feel that you or your loved ones are ‘stuck’ and ‘held captive’? It is time to humble ourselves with fasting and prayer. To ask that God would set our families free from the captivity He has allowed, due to the sins of our fathers and our own sins. Perhaps He will send healing and freedom and renewed faith for us and our loved-ones.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God “as soon as Daniel began to pray”, to answer Daniel’s prayer and to give him a prophecy concerning the future. We don’t know how long Daniel was fasting and praying, but we have his example as an inspiration to pray and believe that God does hear our prayers of humble confession, even though we may not know how He will answer. A portion of God’s answer through Gabriel is the amazing 70-weeks prophecy. The key portion is as follows:

“Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place. Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens,’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’ It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two ‘sevens,’ the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’ In the middle of the ‘seven’ he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And at the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him” (9:24-27).

There are different views on how to interpret this prophecy. One widely accepted line of interpretation is as follows:

v.24 Daniel was told that a period of 70 “weeks” had been decreed by God for the completion of 6 important aspects of God’s program for Israel (note the underline portions in v.24 above). Scholars understand the 70 “weeks” to be 70 *periods of 7 years*, or a total of 490 years. Thus, a specific time-frame is given for the God’s program to be fulfilled – 490 years.

v.25 Daniel was told that the prophetic clock would start ticking at a specific moment: at the issuing of a decree to “*restore and rebuild Jerusalem.*” The arrival of Messiah would happen 69 “weeks” after this decree (= 483 years later). There were numerous decrees issued by Persian kings for the Jews to return and rebuild their way of life. It seems likely that the decree in view here is the one issued by Artaxerxes Longimanus in 445B.C., giving permission to Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls and the city (see the decree recorded in Nehemiah 2:5-8). Using the Jewish custom of a 360-day year, this would place the arrival of Messiah 483 years later, right at the time Jesus was making His triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the last week of His life.

v.26 After the 69th week (the 483 years) the Messiah would be cut off (some translations read “killed”) and the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed “by the people of the prince who is to come.” Wars and desolations would then follow until the last days. Of course, Jesus was killed at the end of the Passover week, and decades later the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem (70 A.D.).

v.27 Finally the 70th week will come in God’s perfect timing. The “prince” will make a covenant with the Jews, but in the middle of the 70th week (the final period of 7 years) he will break the covenant, abolish Jewish sacrifices and perform abominations in the midst of Israel until the time when his own destruction is decreed by God.

While some interpreters see the 70th week following right after the death and resurrection of Jesus, it is difficult to see how the details of the week-70 events fit with the historical period following the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we combine the description of the 70th week with end-time prophecies found elsewhere in Scripture, it seems to call for a different line of interpretation involving a long pause, or gap between the end of 69th week and the start of the 70th week.

The 70th week (or 7-year period) is the “tribulation period” referred to elsewhere in the Bible. According to the book of Revelation, it will be in the middle of this final 7-year tribulation that the anti-Christ will arise and assert his authority on earth as the prince of the kingdom of Satan (see Rev. 13; Matthew 24:15-21; 2Thess. 2:1-12). The reign of the anti-Christ will be ended when Jesus Christ returns to earth as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev.18 depicts the fall of Satan’s kingdom, while Rev.19 shows the return of Christ to earth). On this view, the 70th week of Daniel has yet to occur. It is a future period of 7 years at the end of human history as we know it.

We are, thus, left with a “gap” between the 69th and 70th weeks of this prophecy. That “gap” is the present age we live in, sometimes called “the age of the Gentiles” (see Luke 21:24, also Romans 11). We could say that Daniel’s prophetic clock has been on “pause” since the end of the 69th week (the death and resurrection of Jesus). The current work of God in drawing humanity to Himself is happening during this pause. But the time will come when God will decree that the prophetic clock starts ticking again with the final 70th week (the final 7 years) leading up to the return of Christ and the complete overthrow of Satan’s kingdom here on earth.

69 weeks (483 yrs) -----↑-----GAP-----70th week (7 yrs)

Decree to
rebuild
Jerusalem

Messiah
comes, is
cut off, or
killed

Gap/pause between
end of 69th week and
start of 70th week.
“Times of Gentiles”

Anti-Christ rules,
then is overthrown
when Christ comes
from heaven

Daniel's final Vision- Ch. 10:1-12:13
More of Israel's Future until Christ's Messianic Kingdom

Ch. 10 begins with the recounting of another vision during the 3rd year of Cyrus king of Persia, concerning a great war. Daniel was so shaken that he began to mourn, fast and to pray for 21 days. He did not know it *but as soon as he began to pray an angel- messenger was sent to come to him*. Yet, there was a conflict in the spiritual realm that was so fierce that Michael the archangel had to help this messenger angel (perhaps Gabriel) overcome the resistance of the evil spirit behind the king of Persia! Michael seems to have been assigned to help Daniel and the Jews (10:21).

Spiritual warfare is real! Ephesians 6:10-18 teaches that there is spiritual warfare going on in the invisible heavens and our prayers are the power that God has chosen to use to bring about victories in the heavenly realms and on earth. It took 21 days of prayer and fasting and an additional 3 days plus the extra efforts of Michael the archangel to win against the prince of darkness and allow Daniel to receive the final vision and interpretations! Jesus commanded His followers to pray fervently and not to give up! (Lk 18:1). What does God want you to be fervently praying about? What does He want you to give up during your time of fervent prayer? Try committing to a 21 day 'Daniel Fast' where you seek God and believe that He will answer you as you remain faithful and fervent in prayer.

It was on the 24th day that Daniel was standing by the Tigris River, when ONE who seemed to be a figure like the glorious RISEN CHRIST the Apostle John saw (Revelation 1:12-16). His voice and appearance was so over-whelming that Daniel, like the Apostle John, fell on the ground face-down, weak and trembling like a dead man.

“I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; those who were with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless” (10:5-8).

Afterwards it seems that the glorious figure was gone and one like an angel began to speak to Daniel “to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days” (10:14).

The near future of Israel: 11:1-35 From the time of Darius the Mede to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (540-160 B.C.). These events depict the long struggle between Egypt (South) and Syria (North) as they vied for control of the Greek kingdom left by Alexander the Great. Roughly 135 prophecies were literally fulfilled in this historical period (showing the accuracy of the book of Daniel).

The distant future of Israel: 11:36 – 12:4 The vision jumps forward to the exploits of the anti-Christ in the last days (11:36-45) and then the time of great tribulation (12:1-4). In this dark period, the light of God's people will shine brightly.

“Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (12:3).

The final words to Daniel: 12:5-13 It is revealed to Daniel that from the time *“the power of the holy people is broken”* until the completion of these final events, it will take 3-1/2 years (12:6,7). This 3-1/2 years refers to the last half of Daniel's 70th week. As we learned earlier, at the mid-point of the final 7-yr period the anti-Christ will assert himself as king of the earth and, at the same time, he will persecute God's people (see notes on 9:27 above). Before the book concludes, Daniel is given on last piece of intriguing, but mysterious prophetic detail.

“From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days” (12:11,12).

The setting up of the abomination of desolation takes place at the mid-point of the final 7 years. 3-1/2 years later (1,260 days), the end will come and Christ will return to earth. But some important events will happen in the 75 days that follow Christ's return, and the people who live to see these events will be blessed. 1,290 days is 30 days beyond 3-1/2 years (assuming the prophetic years are 360 days). 1,335 days is another 45 days. Daniel (and we) are left wondering why these additional 75 days are so important. We can only guess (since much of biblical prophecy remains mystery). Perhaps in the first 30 days Christ will restore the land of Israel from the devastation of the events of the tribulation period. Perhaps in the additional 45 days He will fulfill His role as judge of the nations (the sheep and the goats parable, Matthew 25:31-46) in preparation for the initiation of His millennial rule on earth. We do know these mysteries were “sealed up” even to Daniel the prophet.

Discussion Questions

1. Daniel and his friends exercised “even if” faith (see box p.795). How did they get to the place where they could trust God “even if” the answer to their prayers was not what they desired. How can you get to the place where you exercise “even if” faith?
2. The book of Daniel emphasizes prayer: Daily prayers (ch.6), prayers for wisdom and insight in a crisis (ch.2), prayers of intercession, confession and repentance (ch.9), prayers of mourning (ch.10). What step(s) can you take to strengthen your prayer life?
3. Daniel was exemplary in his work environment, and was always highly regarded no matter who he worked for. How does Daniel’s example encourage you to live a more exemplary, God-honoring life in the midst of your everyday duties and responsibilities?
4. Daniel’s prophecies are far-reaching, looking to the end of the age, the rise of the anti-Christ, the final tribulation period, and the 2nd coming of Jesus to earth. What sorts of feelings/thoughts arise in you as you look at our current world situation and then look at what the Bible says about the future course of world events?
5. The prophetic picture of the entire Bible indicates that in “the last days” it will be increasingly difficult to live as a follower of Christ because there will be increasing persecution. As you think about your own faith and walk with God right now, what are you doing to strengthen yourself to be prepared to live for Christ in a world that increasingly hates Him (and His followers)? Jesus said: *“You will be hated by all on account of Me” (Matthew 24:9-14).*

GOD WITH US

Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return

Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 9 – The “Son of Man” Arrives

(Palm Sunday, 2018)

Introduction

Daniel saw more precisely than any other prophet the *timing* of Messiah's arrival. Specifically, in the 70-weeks prophecy of chapter 9, Daniel was told that there would be 69 “weeks” (groups of 7 years – 483 years) before Messiah would come.

“Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens,’ and sixty-two ‘sevens.’ It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two ‘sevens,’ the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing” (Daniel 9:25,26).

The decree of Artaxerxes Longimanus in 445B.C. gave Nehemiah permission to return and rebuild Jerusalem (Neh. 2:5-8). Fast forward 483 years (360-day years) and *we find ourselves at the beginning of the final week of Jesus' life, as He goes up to Jerusalem for the Passover feast.* All four gospels record the “triumphal entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem on “Palm Sunday.” It is the gospel of John, however, that records Jesus giving the longest commentary on the true meaning of His arrival in Jerusalem. He had come as “*the Son of Man,*” not to be enthroned but to “*be put to death and have nothing*” (Daniel 9:26). The alignment between Daniel's prophecy and Jesus' triumphal entry is strong. We pick up the story in John chapter 12.

A Great Crowd Celebrates Jesus' Arrival

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet Him, shouting, “Hosanna!” “Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the king of Israel!” Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: “Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.” At first His disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about Him and that these things had been done to Him. Now the crowd that was with

Him when He called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that He had performed this sign, went out to meet Him. So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after Him!” (John 12:12-19).

There were roughly 2-3 million people in Jerusalem for the Passover. Nearly half the entire country came for this Feast – a vast multitude inside and outside the city. In recent weeks, Jesus had raised Lazarus after 4 days in the grave in the nearby town of Bethany (see John ch.11:38-44). As a result, huge crowds were following Jesus from Bethany and the surrounding areas as He made His way to Jerusalem for the Passover week. As they approached the city, they brought a donkey for Jesus to ride on, at His own request. This was not only a fulfillment of a 500-year old prophecy from Zechariah (Zech.9:9), it was also a customary way for a visiting king to ride into a city. If a king came on a white warhorse, it was an act of intimidation, a sort of declaration of war: Surrender or else! But if a king came on a donkey, it was considered an act of peace, a declaration of diplomacy.

As Jesus was riding into the city with this giant crowd surrounding Him, those from within the city came out to welcome the incoming crowd. This also was part of the tradition. As new groups of pilgrims arrived, those in the city would go out to welcome them, and they would chant a sequence of Psalms back and forth to one another, in a call and response way. One of the Psalms they sang back and forth was Psalm 118, in which we hear these lines:

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“*Son of David*” refers to the 1,000-year old promise that God would send a son of David to rule over a kingdom that would last forever. “*Hosanna*” is a cry for deliverance from Psalm 118: “*Save us now!*” When you put together all the background pieces, it is clear what was happening. This huge crowd hoped that Jesus, after 3 years of incredible miracle-working ministry, was coming into town to overthrow the Romans, undo all the oppression the Jews had been under for centuries (especially the Roman oppression of the previous 100 yrs.) and set up a kingdom that would be nothing short of heaven-on-earth.

In Luke's account we learn that Jesus, sensing their misguided (yet hopeful) expectations, wept when the city of Jerusalem came into full view.

As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's visitation" (Luke 19:41-44).

That word "visitation" is only used 1 other time in this sense - 1Pt. 2:12 referring to 2nd coming of Christ. God "visited" the earth once at the 1st coming Christ, and He will make another "visitation" at the 2nd coming. The problem was that these excited and expectant crowds "*did not recognize the time of God's visitation.*" They did not realize that, as Daniel had prophesied, the Messiah had come on this first visit *not to be enthroned, but to be killed (cut off)*. Jesus was not headed toward a throne and a crown of gold, rather, toward a cross and a crown of thorns. As John makes clear, not even the disciples understood the meaning of the events surrounding Jesus' "triumphal entry" (John 12:16).

The Gentiles' Question Signals a Shift in the Clock

It is only in John's gospel that we read of the appearance of a group of Greeks (Gentiles, or non-Jews) who were going up to the Passover feast. They were, apparently, proselytes (converts) to Judaism. Hearing that Jesus was arriving, this group of Greeks sought to obtain an audience with Jesus.

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus (John 12:20-22).

We know that the mission of taking the gospel *to the Gentile world* became the major focus in the book of Acts. Based on Jesus' reaction to this request for a meeting with Gentiles, it seems that Jesus knew intuitively that their interest in Him signaled that a *moment had come*; it was time for Him to make the final provision

for the Gentile mission: He would have to go to the cross and die for the sins of *the Jews and Gentiles* so that forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life could be offered to all mankind.

It is fascinating to note how well this fits in with Daniel's vision of "the Son of Man" as the "Ancient of Days" granted Him authority to establish a kingdom over "*all nations and people of every language.*"

"He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped Him" (Daniel 7:13,14).

God has always been interested in the salvation of the whole world. He intended for the Jews to be a "kingdom of priests" to represent Him to all nations (Exodus 19:5,6). "For God so loved THE WORLD that He gave His only begotten Son . . ." (John 3:16). Does your heart reflect God's heart of love for ALL PEOPLE?

John's gospel does not discuss Jesus' actual meeting with this Greek delegation of pilgrims. Instead, John records in detail Jesus' own words explaining what this Gentile interest meant to Him.

Jesus declares that "THE HOUR" has come.

In response to the interest of the Greeks, Jesus declared that "the hour" had arrived for *the Son of Man* to die. (The use of the Son of Man title is very significant here. See earlier notes on p.799.) It was only through His death that the fruit of changed lives would be made possible. And it was only through His death that the Evil One would be defeated.

Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves Me must follow Me; and where I am, My servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves Me. Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had

thundered; others said an angel had spoken to Him. Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not Mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself.” He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die (12:23-33).

Just as the book of Daniel had predicted, the Son of Man would arrive right on schedule (483 years). But He would arrive and subsequently be put to death, not seated on an earthly throne. His death would be like a seed planted in the ground that would bear much fruit (among both Jews and Gentiles). On the level of spiritual conflict in the heavenly realms, Jesus would come to engage in spiritual battle with “the prince of this world” and to drive him (Satan) out from his seat of authority over humanity.

Note: There is not only great alignment between Daniel and John in terms of prophecy-fulfillment on the *historical level*, there is also alignment on the *cosmic level* with their portraits of the spiritual conflict going on between God and Satan. In Daniel, we see angelic beings like Michael and Gabriel *waging war* against evil spiritual beings (eg. Daniel 10:12-14). Daniel gives us insight into how Satan is always trying to hinder the advancement of God’s program in this world. Further, we see through Daniel how God is always overcoming Satan’s best efforts to maintain control (eg. the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar to be a worshipper of God; or Michael the angel helping Gabriel overcome the opposition of “the prince of Persia” – the evil angelic being assigned by Satan to guide the king of Persia or, later, the prince of Greece – 10:20).

In John’s gospel, we see similar themes. Clearly, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was a battle between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light (see John 1:5). As He approached His death, Jesus saw the war between Himself and Satan coming to a head (see John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). It is no surprise, then, in his summary of the purpose of Jesus’ coming that the apostle John would later write: “*The Son of God appeared for this very purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil*” (1John 3:8).

The Crowd’s confusion – Jesus’ Reply

The crowd that heard Jesus was confused. They thought that when the Messiah (the Son of Man) arrived He would set up a kingdom that would last forever. They wanted to know what sort of “Son of Man” this was who would die . . .

The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Messiah will remain forever, so how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this ‘Son of Man’?” (12:34).

Jesus kept His explanation simple. He told them that the battle between light and darkness was about to reach a whole new level, and that they had better stay close to Him while there was time.

Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where they are going. Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.” When He had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid Himself from them (12:35,36).

Many then and now say that Jesus was “just a man.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus was the divine “Son of Man” who was granted authority by God the Father to be the ruler of mankind, the King of eternity. He came the first time to die for the sins of the world and to break the power of the Evil One. He will come a second time to demolish Satan’s kingdom and establish the eternal kingdom of God on earth (see Rev.18,19). Truly, history is His-story!

Discussion Questions

1. The battle between kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness is very real. What evidence do you see today, in our world, of this ongoing spiritual warfare between the Son of God and the Evil One? How does Ephesians 6 tell us to be strong in this spiritual warfare (Eph.6:10-18)?
2. The crowds expected Jesus to be their triumphant revolutionary. We all have many “expectations” of Jesus that are off (things we expect Him to be or to do for us that He never promised He would do). What are some of your own wrong expectations of Jesus?
3. Daniel saw/prophesied certain things about the Messiah roughly 500+ years before Jesus. Jesus did/said things that completely aligned with Daniel’s message. This is the convergence between prophecy and fulfillment. How does this alignment between Daniel and Jesus encourage you? How does it shape your ability to take God at His word?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 10 – The Sovereign Lord leaves His temple
Ezekiel 1-24

Introduction

Ezekiel was born in a priestly family. He was deported to Babylon at the time of the 2nd invasion by Nebuchadnezzar (597 BC), 11 years before the final destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC). He was 30 years old when God appeared to him and called him to speak. He prophesied for 22 years while living among the Jewish exiles in Babylon. His home was among the exiles at Nippur, roughly 50 miles south of Babylon on the Euphrates River. Ezekiel was married, but lost his wife by sudden death on the same day that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem.

A major uniqueness of Ezekiel is God's constant use of the title "**Adonai-Yahweh**" to introduce the words of God (210 times!). Bible translations vary as to how to translate this dual title of God; but the New International Version wisely translates this as "**Sovereign LORD.**" This highlights a key point in Ezekiel's theology. Yahweh is the "sovereign" (king) over *all nations*, not just Israel. As even Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon learned through his 7-year experience of humbling before God: "*His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation ... He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth ...*" (Daniel 4:34-35).

Another uniqueness of Ezekiel centers around his heritage as a **priest**. He *did* function as a priest in one sense: he stood between God and man mediating the passionate heart and message of God toward rebellious humanity. However, the "normal activity" for a Jewish priest would have been to minister in the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel was unable to do so due to his exile in Babylon (where there was no Jewish temple). But he was given a unique opportunity to "see" two temples of the Lord. In the first section of his book he was transported in visions to the temple in Jerusalem, where he saw sins of idolatry being committed. Along with these visions, he saw the "glory of the Lord" departing from the temple in stages (9:3 > 10:4 > 10:18,19 > 11:22-23). Then, in

the last section of his book, Ezekiel was given a detailed and grand vision of a future temple (likely the temple to be built during the millennial reign of Christ) and he saw the glory of God returning to dwell in the midst of His redeemed people (43:1-5). Yes, Ezekiel was deprived the opportunity to minister as a priest in a physical temple; but as a prophet he was *“in the temple”* both present and future, beholding the glory of God in relation to His people.

The book of Ezekiel contains more symbolism than any of the prophets. Yet, his prophecies have been arranged with great attention to order and chronology. An outline is as follows:

1. Ezekiel’s vision of God and call to minister: chs.1-3
2. Prophecies of Jerusalem’s destruction: chs.4-24
3. Prophecies against foreign nations: chs.25-35
4. Prophecies of Israel’s future restoration: chs.36-48

Ezekiel’s vision of God and call to minister: Chs.1-3

Ezekiel saw a glorious vision of the glory of God where He commissioned him to go and speak (similar to Isaiah’s experience, but more detailed – see Isaiah 6). The audience for his message was the “rebellious” people of Israel (“rebellious” or synonyms occur 9 times in ch.2 alone; 20+ times in the whole book). He was given a scroll to “eat” that contained lamentations, mourning and woes (the sovereign Lord’s message to His rebellious people). God assured Ezekiel that although the people were stubborn and rebellious, He had made the prophet’s face *“as hard as their faces”* – *“like emery harder than flint I have made your forehead”* (3:9). Ezekiel would be able to withstand their stubbornness and, even if they refused to respond, *“at least they will know that a prophet has been among them”* (2:4,5).

Ezekiel was then transported by the Spirit to a group of exiles where he sat for 7 days *“causing consternation among them”* (3:15). Ezekiel was told that the people would arrest and imprison him. Further, God would make him unable to speak until such times as God would open his mouth to speak (3:26,27). He was warned by God to be a faithful *“watchman”* over the people, delivering God’s messages no matter how people responded (see all of 3:16-21 for this significant watchman analogy).

“Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me” (3:17).

Before launching Oak Pointe Church in 1997, Shirley was studying Ezekiel. Here is her journal entry: "I am amazed at some of the callings mere men received from God for their mission and ministry. Ezekiel was warned that his ministry would bear little fruit, but "at least they will know they have a prophet among them" (2:5). Ezekiel would sacrifice a normal life (and even his speech) for the high privilege of a personal contact with the living God. But his FAITHFULNESS as a WATCHMAN was crucial, otherwise God would be quick to punish him and hold him accountable. I'm thinking in regards to Bob and me doing a church plant – God certainly wants a FULL COMMITMENT. There's no doubt that as in days past, the cost will be there and yet there is no greater calling and privilege than being used to call men and women to repentance and holiness. Lord, make us ready and full of YOUR SPIRIT to succeed in fulfilling our calling to plant YOUR CHURCH. I am willing – make me ready." (April 17,1996)

Prophecies of Jerusalem's destruction: Chs.4-24

Most of the first half of Ezekiel is devoted to a description of the sins of God's people, and God's judgment for their sin (the Babylonian overthrow of Jerusalem, resulting in the expulsion of God's people from the land).

Ezekiel acts out the siege: Chs.4-7

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem was acted out symbolically by Ezekiel. He used a brick to depict Jerusalem, and miniature ramps and battering rams to depict the attackers. He then lay on his left side for 390 days depicting the years of Israel's iniquity (Northern kingdom), and 40 more days depicting the years of Judah's iniquity (Southern kingdom). He then cut off the hair of his head and beard. One third was burned at the center of his miniature city. One third was struck with the sword all around the city. One third was scattered to the wind (driven from the city). Only a few hairs were kept, bound safely in Ezekiel's robe (God's promise that a remnant would be preserved, see 6:8-10).

No matter how difficult or strange God's assignment was, Ezekiel faithfully obeyed and carried out his duties so as to accurately deliver God's messages to His people. Has God been inviting you to obey Him in some way that seems difficult or strange to you? Is He asking you to take a step of faith into the unknown? Take courage from Ezekiel. God always honors our steps of obedience to His promptings.

Ezekiel is taken in visions to Jerusalem: Chs.8-11

Ezekiel was visited by the elders of Israel in his home in Babylon. It is likely that they came to inquire of him concerning conditions back in the homeland. While meeting with them, he was transported “in spirit” (in visions given by the Spirit) to Jerusalem where he beheld all sorts of abominable idol worship. At the same time, he saw the glory of God gradually departing from the temple in Jerusalem.

1. The idol of jealousy 8:1-6. He was first taken to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, *“where the seat of the idol of jealousy was located – which provokes (the Lord) to jealousy.”* We do not know which “god” this idol was pointing to, but it likely involved the sacrifice of children in fire to appease the god. We do know that it provoked the Lord to jealousy (the theme of divine jealousy appears repeatedly - 5:13; 16:38,42; 36:6; 38:19).

God is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5). He rightly deserves our devotion (because He made us for relationship with Himself) and He is righteously angry when we devote our hearts to other “gods.” Is there some “idol” in your life right now that you are devoting yourself to, that is causing God to be jealous for you? Remember: You are God’s “living temple” right now (1Cor.6:19). James wrote: “He jealously longs for the Spirit that He has made to dwell in us” (James 4:5).

2. The secretive seventy elders 8:7-13. Ezekiel was next led (still “in spirit”) to dig through a hole in the wall of the temple. He entered a dark inner room where he saw 70 elders of Israel secretly making incense offerings to animal inscriptions on a wall. The Lord told Ezekiel what these men were thinking in their hearts: *“They say, ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land’” (8:12).* Yet, the Lord always sees and judges *the secrets of men’s hearts (Romans 2:16).*

The apostle Paul wrote about how humanity had “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (Romans 1:23). This is sin that greatly grieves the heart of God – when we worship what He has created in place of Him, THE CREATOR! It is like going to an art gallery and worshipping a painting, instead of honoring the artist who created the painting. There are many amazing things in creation to marvel at; but check yourself as you marvel. Give praise to the artist/Creator Who made it all!

3. Women weeping for Tammuz 8:14,15. Ezekiel next saw women crying out to Tammuz, the Babylonian god of fertility. The legend was that this god “died” during the dry summer months of June and July, resulting in the crops drying up in drought-like conditions. By “*weeping for Tammuz,*” these women were beseeching the god to “rise from the dead” and bring back the rains that would cause their crops to grow again. They were looking to this god as their provider and sustainer in times of need.

Today, we may not weep for Tammuz; but we may look to sources other than God for our provision and sustenance in times of need. God can use other sources as channels through which His provisions flow (a job, savings, an investment, a friend, an inheritance, a gift); but we dishonor God our Provider and Sustainer when we worship these “gifts” rather than the God behind the gifts. What circumstance(s) causes you to trust in someone or something other than God?

4. Twenty-five sun-worshipping priests 8:16. Continuing in the vision, Ezekiel saw the inner court of the temple where 25 priests were worshipping the sun, “*the crowning insult to the Lord of heaven and earth*” (Feinberg, Ezekiel). These 25 men represented the 24 Levitical-priestly courses, with the high priest at their head. It is noted that they had turned their backs to the temple of the Lord, while their faces were turned toward the sun!

5. The pronouncement of God’s judgment 8:17-9:2. Ezekiel heard God call forth angels to execute His judgment against the city of Jerusalem. Of course, the human instrument was Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army; but as we have seen in the book of Daniel, angels (both good and evil) were (and still are) working behind the scenes in every city.

“... in the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar ... he came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down” (2Kings 25:8,9).

6. Those who sigh and groan 9:4. Before the judgment of God fell on Jerusalem, the Lord sent an angel out to “*put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations*” being committed in Jerusalem (9:4). These individuals cared greatly about the things that God cared about. Those without the mark fell under the judgment of God. This is

significant, for in the midst of a *nation-wide judgment*, God still knows people *individually* and will deal with them according to their *personal relationship with Him*.

The Lord sees and knows each of us. He knows what we are doing, what we are thinking, and what we are passionate about. He knows when we compromise our convictions. He knows when we stand for them and grieve over injustice. Jesus said: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt.5:4). James also wrote about "mourning" over sin (James 4:9,10). What injustices and evils are being committed in our world today that cause you to sigh and groan? What grieves your heart?

7. The presence (glory) of God departing. Throughout this section of Ezekiel (chs.8-11), there is a sweeping contrast between *the glory of God* and *the abominable idolatries of man*. Sadly, Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord gradually departing from Jerusalem, as a direct consequence of their refusal to love Him. *"The rabbis enumerated 10 stages whereby the Shekinah (glory of God) withdrew. These stages unmistakably reveal the loving and longing reluctance of God to leave His sanctuary where He dwelt in the midst of His beloved and erring people" (Feinberg, Ezekiel, p.67).* Recall that when Moses first constructed the Tabernacle of God, the glory of the Lord descended upon it when it was completed (Exodus 40:34-38). He also displayed His glorious presence at the opening of Solomon's temple (2Chronicles 7:1). Now, God was departing from Israel. The glory of the Lord moved from the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies to the threshold of the temple (9:3 and 10:4); then from the threshold to above the cherubim carrying the chariot of God (10:18); then to the entrance of the east gate of the Lord's house (10:19).

God's presence gradually left the temple, and no one (but Ezekiel) even noticed! In the New Testament, we are taught that the Holy Spirit who indwells us will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Yet, we can willfully stifle the Holy Spirit's work in our lives by turning our backs on His presence, choosing instead to follow our own self-willed ways. IF the Holy Spirit's dynamic work in your life was shut down (by you) today, would you notice a difference? What thoughts and behaviors would change?

8. Twenty-five bad leaders 11:1-13. 25 leaders are singled out for attention. Ezekiel saw them at the east gate of the temple. They were called out for their special role in leading the people

away from God's counsel. ***"These are the men who devise iniquity and give evil advice in this city" (11:2).*** An example of their bad advice is given: ***"They say, 'Is not the time near to build houses?'"*** In short, they contradicted God's words concerning the length of the captivity (70 years). They have ***"multiplied the dead in the city, filling its streets with them" (11:6).*** The blood of the followers will be required of the leaders. As an immediate statement, Ezekiel was commanded by God to prophesy against the leaders. As he did, one of the 25 leaders, Pelatiah, died!

Leadership is a major issue in Ezekiel. We see the power of failed leadership that brought great harm to the people. In contrast, we see a faithful young leader in Ezekiel, as he followed God and spoke God's words without compromise (in contrast to the many bad leaders). We all lead in various ways. Who has God called you to lead? Who follows you? Children? A classroom full of students? Employees? A team? Friends? Are you being faithful in your role as a leader to speak truth and live rightly?

9. God will someday restore the exiles 11:14-20. Ezekiel's vision of Jerusalem draws to a close with *the first message of future hope* for God's people. Those who had remained in Jerusalem had become arrogant and disdainful toward the exiled community in Babylon, saying that the Lord had given the land to them and He had forgotten about those who went into exile (11:15). On the contrary, God assured Ezekiel that *those who went into exile* (their descendants) would someday constitute the regathered nation who would be restored to the land (a promise partially fulfilled in the post-exilic period, but more fully in the millennial kingdom, still future).

Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it. And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God" (11:17-20).

Note: God's promise to give them "new hearts" (Ezekiel 11:19,20; 36:26,27) formed the basis for Jesus' teaching about the "new birth," a concept which He expected the Jewish teacher Nicodemus to know about! (See John 3 for this important encounter.)

10. The glory of God departs 11:22-25. The final scene in Ezekiel's vision shows God's glory moving up from over Jerusalem to the mountain just east of the city. This would refer to the Mount of Olives, the very same mountain from which Jesus departed the earth (Acts 1), and to it He will return at His second coming (Zechariah 14; Luke 21:20; Matthew 24:3). The fact that God's glory was last seen hovering over the mountain east of the city gives a dramatic effect. It feels as if a departing lover is looking back waving goodbye to His beloved, and looking longingly for the day He will return. As the vision ended, Ezekiel found himself once again with the elders in his house in Babylon.

Have you ever had to leave ... to walk away from someone because of their repeated sins against you and their stubborn refusal to acknowledge their sins and repent? So it was with God. After many centuries of patiently enduring Israel's unfaithfulness to Him, and after endless pleas for them to return to Him, God finally handed His people over to their own way and He abandoned His house (temple) among them. Today, God dwells in temples of human hearts. He never leaves us or forsakes us . . . but He is grieved when we stubbornly refuse to walk in partnership with Him. On the other hand, He is delighted when we choose to "walk in the good works that He has prepared in advance for us to do" with Him (Ephesians 2:10). If you were to ask God, right now, what it feels like for Him to live in the temple of your heart, what do you think He would say?

Pictures of Israel's unfaithfulness/God's judgment: Chs.12-24

While the vision of chs.8-11 formed a clear unit, the following chapters are a compilation of scenes, messages and parables. They all center on the repeated theme of Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant with Yahweh, and the Sovereign Lord's decision to judge His people.

1. Ezekiel enacts the exile: Ch.12. Ezekiel enacted the inhabitants of Jerusalem going from the city into exile. Specifically, "the prince" is depicted going to Babylon blind, a clear reference to king Zedekiah who was blinded by Nebuchadnezzar before being taken away (see 2Kings 25:7). The people contended that Ezekiel's visions were for the distant future; but God insisted that His judgments would be delayed no longer.

2. False prophets singled out for judgment: Ch.13. God pronounced judgment on the false prophets (male and female) who had led His people astray. They were speaking from their own inspiration, rather than from the Lord (13:2). They were like builders who plaster over a wall to make it look new; but do not really deal with the damage in the wall that makes it fatally flawed (13:10). There were also female prophetesses who dabbled in magic and sorcery, using magic bands and veils as instruments in their trade, in exchange for meager wages (a handful of barley).

The false prophets plastered over walls (made things look good on the outside, when the inside was broken). Today we “plaster over our walls” when we blame, minimize, rationalize or deny the root causes of our behaviors. How much wiser to invite the Spirit of God to reveal what He sees in the deep places of our hearts. “Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any way of pain in me, and lead me in Your everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23,24). Are there any broken walls in your heart that you are trying to “plaster over?”

3. Elders with idols in their hearts: Ch.14. Here were leaders sitting with Ezekiel, acting like they were heeding his words. Yet, God saw that there were idols in their hearts that would prevent them from responding to what Ezekiel was saying. God told Ezekiel to speak a message confronting them on their hidden idolatries, which he did. God’s stern rebuke was intended to bring about a good end: He will ***“lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel” (14:5)***. The sin of Israel had gone so deep that even if Noah, Daniel and Job were alive and interceding, they could only deliver themselves, not the nation. This was a grave assessment of the spiritual condition of the nation, and a firm warning that God’s hand of judgment could not be turned back. Yet, after the judgment had run its course, ***“you will see their conduct and actions; then you will be comforted for the calamity which I have brought against Jerusalem . . . they will comfort you when you see their conduct and actions, for you will know that I have not done in vain whatever I did to it” (14:22,23)***.

4. Pictures of Israel’s unfaithfulness: Chs.15-17 Israel had become like the useless wood of a vine (ch.15). When intact, vine wood is of little use for building anything; much less after it has been burned in a fire and only a small middle section remains intact. Israel had become an unfaithful wife (ch.16). God had

loved Israel from her youth, taking her from nothing and making her beautiful and famous in the earth. In return, Israel ran off with many other lovers (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon), thus she will fall under judgment. Yet, in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God will remember His covenant with her and restore her in the future (16:60-63). The parable of the eagles (ch.17) depicts the stubbornness of God's people in trying to run away from His hand of discipline. Israel should have submitted to the Babylonian captivity as God's will; instead, they rebelled and ran to Egypt for help.

5. Individual responsibility for sin: Ch.18. A major theme in Ezekiel is the idea of *personal responsibility for choices*. While the nation as a whole was falling under the judgment of God for sin, the prophet's message was clear: *Each person will be judged/rewarded for their own behavior*. As for divine judgment: God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He desires that each person repent and live.

6. Lamentation for Israel's fallen kings: Ch.19. A poem of lament tells of the demise of the "lions of Judah" (her kings and princes). As Ezekiel ministered, Jerusalem was going through the reigns of its last 3 kings before exile: Jehoahaz, Jehoachin and Zedekiah. After them, the line of Davidic kings would be cut off, until Jesus the son of David arrived.

7. God recalls His history with Israel: Chs.20-22. God's painful history with Israel is rehearsed from the beginning (ch.20). Idolatry had always been in her, from the time God drew her out of Egypt until the present. Now, Israel is destined to meet "the sword of the Lord" – Babylon (ch.21).

"The house of Israel has become dross to Me." "I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one" (22:30).

8. The carousing of two sisters: Ch.23. The Northern and Southern kingdoms are depicted as two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, who were both carousing with many lovers. After watching the Northern kingdom associate with "other lovers" (like Assyria), the Southern kingdom did the same, only more so (turning to Assyria, Babylon and Egypt for security). This extended parable shows God's dismay and disgust at the repeated and flagrant unfaithfulness of His people, both North and South.

9. The “death” of God’s wife and Ezekiel’s wife: Ch.24. This section of Ezekiel ends in a shocking way. It happened on the very day Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. God told His servant that he would lose his wife! On that very same day, in the evening, Ezekiel’s wife died. The prophet’s loss became a picture of God’s loss of Israel, His “bride” (Israel). Yet, Ezekiel was told not to mourn the death of his wife (only groan quietly) thus providing a picture of the fact that God would not mourn the overthrow of Jerusalem – a fate that she deserved.

With this symbolic act (the loss of his wife) the prophet Ezekiel had to go a step beyond what even Hosea the prophet was called to endure (marrying an unfaithful woman as a symbol of God’s “marriage” to unfaithful Israel). How difficult it must have been for him to refrain from mourning the loss of his wife; but this he did in order to faithfully portray God’s message concerning the necessity and righteousness of the “death” of the nation Israel at the hands of the Babylonians.

Ezekiel the man stands in stark contrast to nearly every other character in the book. All were turning away from Yahweh in rebellious disobedience, pursuing self-willed paths and pleasure. Ezekiel, on the other hand, sought to live a life that was pleasing to the Lord, no matter what the cost. Jesus said of Himself: “I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29). Paul sought to always “be pleasing to Him” (2Corinthians 5:9). Ezekiel stands tall among those giants of the faith that served the purposes of God in their generation. May his life encourage us to do the same!

Discussion Questions

1. God departed from His people. How do you think God felt at this time? What do *you feel about God* as you read about His departure?
2. Review the many groups of people shown to be rebelling against God. How do they impact you/serve as a warning to you?
 - Secretive 70 elders (8:7-13)
 - Women weeping for Tammuz (8:14,15)
 - Sun-worshipping priests (8:16)
 - 25 bad leaders (11:1-13)
 - False prophets and prophetesses (ch.13)
 - Elders with idols in their hearts (ch.14)
 - Two carousing, immoral sisters (ch.23).
3. How does the life and character of Ezekiel challenge you in your walk with God? What do you most appreciate about this man?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 11 – The Sovereign Lord Will Return
Ezekiel 25-48

Introduction

The first half of Ezekiel's book focused on God's relationship with Israel. The "*Sovereign LORD*" told His erring and rebellious people why He must depart from them for a time (i.e., why He would allow Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians to capture and destroy Jerusalem and the Temple of Yahweh, prepared by King David and built by King Solomon).

Now, in the second half of the book, God spoke to the surrounding nations to let them know that He was in fact the *Sovereign LORD* over them as well. "***Then they will know that I am the LORD***" is a repeated phrase (64x). This was God's ultimate goal – to make Himself clearly and accurately known to all nations. He called these other nations to account for how they treated His people, Israel. But the bigger issue was how these nations had responded to Him, as Sovereign Lord of all. Their treatment of Israel was a sign and symptom of their deeper attitude of unbelief and disrespect toward Yahweh, *Lord of all*.

Then, Ezekiel's eyes turned toward the future of Israel. He was the only prophet through whom God revealed the future of a glorious new city and temple. He sees grand visions of a distant time (the last days) when God will reestablish His presence with His people in a new temple, in the new Jerusalem. The people will have new hearts that are beating in tune with God's heart, and Israel will be glorious among the nations of the world. God will delight in a true relationship with all nations who will know Him and delight in worshipping Him. Israel will be a 'true priest' as was God's calling for them in the first place (Exodus 19:5,6).

Prophecies against foreign nations: Chs.25-35

Most of the O.T. prophets contain sections where God gave messages to the surrounding nations. This shows that God was always interested in *all nations*, not just the nation of Israel. In Ezekiel's oracles (messages), God repeatedly declares His ultimate

purpose in judging these nations: ***“They will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.”*** In every case, the surrounding nations were judged based on their treatment of Israel during the years when Babylon came to overtake Israel. Since the Babylonian invasion was really the hand of God disciplining His erring people, it was important to God that the surrounding nations respond to Israel’s trouble with humility and respect, not with pride and vengeance. Yet, most of the nearby nations *did act against Israel* with arrogance and a spirit of revenge. They “piled on” to Israel’s disaster, thus incurring the justice of the Sovereign LORD.

Every nation has people who have found the true God and have begun to worship Him, even though their whole nation worships other forms of deity and religious systems. God is still looking for people who are truly seeking Him. He sovereignly sends a confirmation of some form to those individuals to let them know that their desire to know the true God has been seen. He uses willing people like you who will follow His promptings to go and speak about Him to those who are open and seeking. What is He prompting you to say or do that would be used by Him to be the answer of a seeking heart?

Ch.25 Warning against Ammon, Moab, Edom and Philistia.

These 4 close neighbors took advantage of Israel during her fall to the Babylonians. They made Israel’s troubles worse by *“acting with vengeance and ancient hostility.”* They would cut down fleeing fugitives instead of giving them help and shelter in their times of distress.

Ch.26-28 Warning against Tyre.

Ezekiel gave an extended message to Tyre. This city-state was known for its sea-trade, being a center for commercial activity in the ancient world. Tyre was rich and glorious, and proud of it! Yet, Tyre, like other neighbors, made the mistake of gloating over Israel’s misfortune. God sent judgment against Tyre in the form of a 13-year long siege by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon! Although Tyre did not fall to Babylon, her strength was greatly reduced. It was Alexander the Great who later conquered Tyre and destroyed it. A short message against Sidon is placed here, since Tyre and Sidon were close neighbors and allies (28:20-24). The warning ends with a prediction of Israel’s future restoration (28:25-26), a testimony to God’s faithfulness to His people, even though the surrounding nations hoped for Israel’s complete extinction.

*The last section of the warning against Tyre is unusual (28:12-19). The lofty language has caused many scholars to interpret this as a case where the prophet was *seeing beyond* the human ruler of Tyre to Satan (as with Isaiah 14:12-15).

“You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you . . . You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones . . .” (Ezekiel 28:12-14).

This passage, combined with Isaiah 14:12-15, tells us several things about Satan: 1) He was originally one of the highest and most important angels, assigned to guard the glory of God. 2) He was perfect and beautiful until pride entered his heart and he decided HE wanted to be God. 3) He was cast down to the earth as a judgment for his rebellion against God. 4) He was in the Garden of Eden.

Chs.29-32 Warning against Egypt. Ezekiel has a long section on Egypt. This was due to the prominent role Egypt played throughout Israel’s history. Israel was captive in Egypt for 400 years from the time of Jacob to Moses, yet Egypt was used by God to be ‘a womb’ where Israel could grow from a mere 70-member family of Jacob, to approximately 2,000,000. After Israel miraculously escaped from slavery out of Egypt, Israel had to constantly live with the threat of Egyptian power looming close by. Egypt was Israel’s nearest and biggest threat for centuries. Further, when Israel was threatened by other mighty nations from further off (Assyria, Babylon), she often ran to Egypt for help – a sin that God constantly rebuked His people for, since they would not turn to Him for help and protection. Thus, in Ezekiel’s extended prophecy, Egypt is depicted as falling to Babylon. Her close allies, Cush (Ethiopia), Libya, Lydia and Arabia, would also fall. Egypt would go into a 40-year period of captivity and dispersion of her own, but afterwards, her people would return to their smaller amount of land and become “*a lowly nation*” that would never be a super-power again. Indeed, Egypt did fall to Babylon, and never rose again to recapture her previous dominance in the world. It is interesting to note that God still used Egypt as a safe-haven for His Son Jesus during the account of Christ’s infancy narrative, to be protected from Herod the Great (Matthew 2:13-23).

Ch.33:1-20 The duty of the watchman. Ezekiel had already been charged by God to be a faithful “watchman” over the people of

Israel (see ch.3:16-21). Now this charge is repeated (33:1-9). The watchman *must* tell the people when trouble is near, otherwise he will be held accountable for the lives of those he failed to warn. Yet, if the watchman *is faithful* to warn people, and they still fail to heed his warnings, then their guilt will fall upon their own heads and the watchman will not have their blood on his own hands (33:10-20).

Today, God essentially is calling us, His Church, His 'watchman'. We are called 'His witnesses' (Matthew 28:18-20). We who have experienced the life-changing message of Jesus Christ's death for our sin, have been called to share 'the good news' (the gospel), with people in our lives. As we learn the truths of forgiveness and restoration with God, and see how our lives are being transformed by His new life within us, He commands us to be His witness to others. This is essentially, the same idea as being 'His watchman'.

Ch.33:21-33 Word comes of the fall of Jerusalem. A messenger escaped from Jerusalem, traveling for 5 months to announce that the city had fallen to the Babylonians. God once again recounts briefly the reasons for her fall –she had failed to keep the Lord's ordinances as given through Moses. On this same day, Ezekiel's tongue was loosed (his muteness removed) so that he could speak freely at any time, rather than only being able to speak when the LORD gave him a message for the people. Yet, Ezekiel was confronted with a difficult reality. God told him that the exiles who were coming to listen to him speak *were not at all interested in heeding and obeying his words!* They were only interested in listening to him as entertainment, much like they would listen to a musician with a sweet-sounding voice. Yes, Ezekiel could now *speak*; but no-one was really *listening* . . .

Ch.34 The shepherds of Israel are condemned. God declared His intentions to rid Israel of selfish and unworthy shepherds who cared very little about the actual lives that they led. He promised in this very tender chapter to be the One who will one day place the "True Shepherd" in the flock- the Son of David, to faithfully shepherd His people. But first, the leaders of Israel were condemned for abusing the sheep to meet their own needs, instead of faithfully caring for God's flock.

"You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they

were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them” (34:4-6).

God foretold that He would remove those worthless shepherds and shepherd His own flock. At some future time, He will set “His servant David” (the Messiah) over the flock. **“I Myself will search for My sheep and look after them” (34:11); “I will place over them one shepherd, My servant David, and He will tend them and be their Shepherd (34:23).** He will restore His scattered flock to their land and finally fulfill His promises to shepherd and care for His people Israel.

In the New Testament, John 10:14-16, Jesus declared, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know My sheep and My sheep know Me- I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them in also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd”. Jesus was referring to the time that the Gentiles (non-Jews after His ascension to heaven), would believe in Him just as the Jews would. He was not exclusive, but rather inclusive. “Every tribe and nation and tongue” (Revelation 7:9) will someday have people who believe and worship Jesus the Son of God, the ‘Son of David’ and ‘Lamb Who was slain’. Pray for God to use YOU to be a ‘witness’ (watchman) to those of a different ‘tongue’. Build a friendship, pray, and be willing to ‘give a respectful account for the hope that you have’ concerning your relationship with the glorious Christ when the opportunity presents itself (1Peter 3:15).

Ch.35 Warning against Edom. A second prophecy against Edom stands alone at the end of this section of Ezekiel. Why is it separated by several chapters from the warnings against other nations, and why is it placed at the end of this part of the book? **Edom was the nation that descended from Esau**, the original twin brother (and constant rival) of **Jacob**. Jacob’s name was changed by God to **Israel** – who was the father of the **nation Israel** (whose 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel). The animosity that existed between the twins Jacob and Esau from birth until death (Genesis 25:19-34; Ch’s 27,33), continued to exist down through the centuries through their descendants. In the prophets, Edom was regularly called out for failing to act like a true “brother” to Israel, choosing instead to pile on disdain and

additional hardships in times of Israel's trouble, and to even attempt to bring about Israel's extinction. Edom (also referred to as 'Mount Seir') deserved a special message of judgment because her role in Israel's hardships was uniquely personal. God literally accused Edom of mocking HIM when they were mocking Israel. He took Edom's hatred of Israel very seriously and predicted that He would ultimately judge them for their hatred (35:11-13; and note also God's comment about Edom at 36:5).

Prophecies of Israel's future restoration: Chs.36-48

The prophets always wove visions of future hope into their collections. The hope was based on God's covenant loyalty to Israel, regardless of how unfaithful Israel was toward God. Ezekiel's vision of the future was incredibly grand and unique.

The restoration of Israel foretold for the SAKE OF GOD'S NAME: Chs.36-37. God will eventually act out of jealous love for His people and, more importantly, *to vindicate the honor of His own Name among the nations.*

Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD,' declares the Lord GOD, 'when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight'" (36:22-23).

He will gather Israel from the nations where they have been scattered and bring them back to their land. He will then sprinkle clean water on them and cleanse them from the filth of their idolatries and unfaithfulness. He will put a new heart in them, and put His Spirit in them so that they will be careful to walk in His ways. They will be His people, and He will be their God. The surrounding nations will look on with amazement as they see God's faithfulness to Israel. They will say: ***"The desolate land has become the Garden of Eden!" (36:35).*** The vision of ***the valley of dry bones*** coming back to life depicts the "resurrection" of Israel (both north and south) from the "death" of captivity (ch.37). God will bring them back to life, restore them to their land and appoint David as king over them.

The future protection of Israel: Chs.38-39. These chapters

depict a future invasion of Israel by a northern confederacy of nations (Gog, Rosh, Meshech and Tubal). This invasion will occur many days after Israel has been restored to her land. Based on evidence from the Book of Revelation, it seems likely that this great war will occur either at the end of the Great Tribulation, or at the end of the Millennium. The main point here is that *God will supernaturally protect His chosen people* from the destructive schemes of hostile human and spiritual forces. When it seems hopeless and that Israel has no ability to be victorious against her adversaries, God the Son will come against them to fight for Israel. Why will God provide such protection for His people? Because He wants to vindicate the honor of HIS OWN NAME, and show the nations who He really is. ***“I will magnify Myself, sanctify Myself, and make Myself known in the sight of many nations; and they will know that I am the LORD” (38:23).***

***A major theme in Ezekiel is the vindication of the honor of God’s NAME (reputation) among the nations. He IS the Sovereign Lord of all. Yet, God’s name was being profaned among the nations due to Israel’s fall and captivity in Babylon. Perhaps the “word around the region” concerning Yahweh went something like this: Yahweh must not be worth worshipping, since the people of Israel turned to other gods (idols) when they were in their land. They gave Baal and Molech and other Canaanite gods more devotion than they did Yahweh. They even filled Yahweh’s temple with their idols! Furthermore, Yahweh did not protect Israel from our armies, who are protected and empowered by our gods! So, Yahweh must not be a very significant god. He is unworthy of devotion, and He is powerless to protect his territory and his people. Or maybe Yahweh is just an unfaithful God who abandoned his people? At best, Yahweh is some low-level local Canaanite deity that the people of Israel decided to toss aside . . . and we should do the same with him.*

One thing God makes CLEAR through Ezekiel is that HIS NAME has been profaned among the nations because of Israel . . . and GOD WILL ACT TO VINDICATE HIS NAME and SHOW HIS TRUE CHARACTER to the nations. God is jealous for the honor of His own name (reputation). And He is angry when His name (His character-who He really is) is misrepresented to the world. The future restoration of Israel (which God will bring about through His own great power and faithfulness) will demonstrate to *the world* who He really is – the *Sovereign Lord* of all humanity!

God uses people to make Himself known to the world. Today, you are His representative, His “ambassador” (2Corinthians 5:20). To put it differently: The only picture of Jesus that some people will ever have is you. So the question is: **How would people describe JESUS after looking at YOU for a while?** Is your life becoming a faithful witness to the character of Jesus? Or, has the name of Jesus (His reputation) been taking a hit because of you?

The future dwelling of God within Israel: Chs.40-48. The book of Ezekiel closes in a most dramatic and fitting way. Recall that Ezekiel was born into a priestly family, but he was unable to minister in a physical temple since he was an exile in Babylon. Yet, God gave Ezekiel the unique opportunity to “see” two temples. In the earlier chapters he was transported in visions to Jerusalem to see the abominable idolatries taking place in the temple built by King Solomon. Now, in the final chapters, Ezekiel is given a detailed vision/blueprint of 1) a glorious future temple and 2) a restored land. The description of the temple reads like a long verbal blueprint. To date, no Jewish temple has been built according to these specifications. It seems likely that he was seeing a vision of a temple that would be built during the millennial reign of Christ, when Jesus will set up His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years with the Jewish nation at the center of human history. Most importantly, Ezekiel saw ***the glory of God coming again to dwell with His people (43:1-5)***. This was the pinnacle vision of Ezekiel, depicting the restoration of Israel in relationship with Yahweh.

God’s Unconditional Promises

Throughout the messages that God proclaimed through Ezekiel, God wanted one main message clear: No matter how things looked at a certain time in human history, He was still the **Sovereign LORD and keeper of His promises**. God keeps His promises when the other person, or nation fails to keep theirs. The prophecies of Israel’s future and of the other nations through Ezekiel, were to declare that **GOD IS THE LORD AND THERE IS NO OTHER**. **Satan** declared to Jesus when he tempted Him in the wilderness, that he (Satan) *‘owned the nations, and they all belonged to him’ (Matthew 4:8)*. It has been a spiritual cosmic battle from before earth was created (Ezekiel 28), when Satan claimed his supreme rule over the Sovereign LORD of all. His lie to himself and to all of humanity has been that we are all able to dethrone the ‘Sovereign One’ with no consequences.

Israel learned that is not reality, and each of us must eventually learn that is not reality! YET- God has continually promised to forgive and restore a people for Himself, starting with Israel, who will recognize Him as their God, and believe in His Son as the True Shepherd and Savior.

*No matter what you are going through, it is a huge encouragement to daily remember that God sees you and is a promise-keeping Shepherd and Savior of your soul. Eternity is hard to comprehend. 'Forever' just doesn't seem real. Yet, each of the prophets have faithfully reminded you that God will keep His promise to Israel, and ultimately to anyone who believes in His Son. He will restore and make all things new. In this world you WILL have trials and tribulations. Take courage that Jesus, God's Son has overcome this world (John 14). You will eventually live again and enjoy the magnificent promises of God, prophesied through faithful men and women throughout the ages. This life is **not** all there is!*

Discussion Questions

1. Ezekiel was called by God as a 30 year old to be a “watchman” (or witness) to the people around him, about the true heart and character of God. He served God for 22 years. Certainly NOT an easy assignment that involved losing his wife (Ch.24). How has his life and message inspired you?
2. GOD’S NAME and GOD’S FAME - God’s name was HOLY yet He put His reputation into the hands of humans. Most of the time they ruined His reputation to the other nations, which kept them from believing that HE ALONE was the only and TRUE GOD. How do you think God’s name and fame are being proclaimed through **your life**? If people based their view of God and Jesus His Son on **your life**, what do you think they would figure out about God?
3. Ezekiel had to live most of his life in Babylon. Although he was a God-fearing person, he still paid a price for the rebellious behaviors of his nation - a high cost that both personally caused him to lose his wife, but also through his witness as a watchman. How are **you** experiencing a cost today, because of either personal choices, or the choices of those around you?
4. God has left us with a hopeful message concerning a future 1,000 year period where His Son will reign with justice, and there will be a time of true belief in Him and true worship. How does that give **you** hope?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 12 – For Such a Time as This
Esther

Introduction

The Book of Esther is an amazing historical account of God's deliverance of the Jews during their 70 defenseless, vulnerable years of captivity in Babylon and Medo-Persia. The Babylonians had been overthrown by the Medes and Persians at the time of Esther. The Persian empire spread from India to Ethiopia (also known as Cush), and was divided into 127 provinces in which the Jews lived. A plot was formed to exterminate all the Jews; but God, being faithful in His covenant love for Israel, thwarted this plot. He protected and preserved His people, demonstrating His commitment to them even while disciplining them in captivity.

Although God receives all glory, He rarely acts independently from people's faith, courage and actions. Rather, He often presents opportunities "*for such a time as this*" for His people who are already positioned to move in faith and partnership with Him. And so it was in the account of Esther. The Jews' deliverance was not unlike the Passover deliverance under Moses (Ex ch.12), when God brought the Jews out of Egypt after passing over the homes that had lamb's blood placed on their doors. This began the annual *Feast of Passover*. The 2nd deliverance during Esther's time led to a new feast – the *Feast of Purim* (still celebrated to this day).

A uniqueness of the story is that the *name of God* is not mentioned once in the book of Esther! Yet, there is great emphasis on the *sovereign hand of God* (sovereign: absolute rule & authority) moving throughout the story. He accomplished His purposes and delivered the Jews from annihilation. Throughout the book of Esther, both women and men were actively making decisions based on faith and wisdom, or based on pride and folly; but the hand of God was moving behind the scenes to bring about His will.

The story of Esther took place during the reign of King Ahasuerus (also named Xerxes I, the son of Darius), who reigned from 486 – 465 B.C. as king over the Medo-Persian empire. In these notes, we will refer to this king as Xerxes.

The 180-day Feast: 1:1-9

One of Xerxes' major campaigns was to attack the kingdom of Greece (Greece would eventually overthrow the Medo-Persian empire and powerfully rule the earth, as the prophet Daniel predicted). The 180-day festival was intended to prepare the nation for the military campaign against Greece. All the nobles and military commanders from the 127 provinces of the kingdom were called to Susa the capitol, for the festival - a massive "tour-de-force" on the part of Xerxes to impress them and inspire confidence in his leadership among his military leaders.

"For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty" (1:4).

Xerxes' extravagant self-promotion was followed by a feast.

"... the king gave a banquet lasting 7 days, in the palace garden... for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa (1:5). Wine was served in goblets of gold... and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality... each man was served as he wished" (1:7,8).

Queen Vashti deposed: 1:9-22

Queen Vashti his wife, also held a 7-day banquet for the women in the royal palace of Xerxes, which indicated her support for her husband's efforts (1:9). Vashti was the most powerful woman in the entire empire, so long as she did not assert her feminine strengths and dignity that might bring shame to her boastful husband, who was a true man of folly and pride.

The turning point in the opening story came when Queen Vashti refused to be "objectified" by her husband on the 7th and last day of the banquet. She knew that her beauty as his wife would be the crowning way that her husband could 'show off' in front of his drunken guests and nobles.

"On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him . . . to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger" (1:10-12).

ANGER AND FOLLY- The book of Proverbs addresses this issue, as well as the added impact of alcohol when angry. King Xerxes is a perfect example of the truths and warnings Proverbs gives.

“Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult (12:16).

“It is not for kings, O Lemuel... it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink” (his mother’s advice, 31:4).

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (16:18).

“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls” (25:28).

The Greek historian Herodotus helps us understand why Vashti refused to submit to the king’s demands for this “beauty pageant.” *Herodotus depicts Ahasuerus (Xerxes) as an impatient, hot-tempered monarch with a wandering eye for women . . . a king who not only tried to have an affair with his brother’s wife, but also did have an affair with her daughter (Edwin Yamauchi).*

Vashti’s courage to hang on to her feminine dignity, by refusing to be paraded before the king’s drunken nobles is profound. She was not afraid of his anger, or its outcome. She had obviously already tolerated her husband’s sexual escapades, including his harem. But this time she felt led to draw a line on her husband’s pride and folly. She had seen his temper and impetuous actions repeatedly, so her courage to decline was with the knowledge that she would most likely pay the highest price – her crown. As a Persian, it is unlikely that she was a believer in Yahweh, Israel’s God, yet she still possessed profound courage.

*Courage is doing what we believe is the right thing, regardless of the outcome. Courage is God-given to all because we are all made in God’s image and He is a courageous God. As a believer in God (O.T.), and His Son Jesus Christ (N.T.), we have an extra measure of courage from His Holy Spirit who dwells within us from the time we believe. Paul reminded Timothy his disciple that **“God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power...” (1Timothy 1:7)**. We will see that Esther and her older cousin Mordecai possessed this kind of courage. Ask God to reveal areas of fear that are keeping you from living out your convictions with courage. Ask Him to enlarge His courage-building power within you, so that you do not fear the outcomes of your obedience to God.*

Xerxes consulted with his 7 highest advisors in the kingdom as to what he should do. They seemed to react in **fear** by greatly exaggerating the possible outcome across the entire empire. Xerxes was the one who had done wrong, not his wife. He never should have demanded her to subject herself to such male folly. But now he and the nobles were in a predicament. Their generalized and exaggerated assumption was that Vashti's actions would empower women of nobility throughout the entire empire to rebel against their husbands: ***"There will be no end of the disrespect and discord" (1:18)***. Xerxes saved face by impetuously following their advice, immediately removing Vashti from her position as queen. In this case God's sovereignty was being exercised behind the human conclusions and the choice to depose Vashti.

Jumping to decisions without careful thought almost always leads to mistakes. It can be driven by pride and shame as in Xerxes' case. The Proverbs give guidance on this issue: "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but folly is the deception of fools" (14:8). "The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps" (14:15). "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20). Do you tend to make hasty decisions without seeking wise counsel? Or without weighing the 'advice' of people? Recall a past hasty decision that cost you in the outcome. Reflect on how you might be making hasty far-reaching decisions, in your current circumstances. Ask God to grow prudence in your life.

It was after this banquet and the deposing of Vashti that Xerxes went to war against Greece and was soundly defeated. He returned to oversee his still intact, but weakened empire. Several years lapsed between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, where Esther enters the story.

Esther chosen to be Queen: 2:1-18

Four years had elapsed since Xerxes deposed Vashti. ***"He remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her" (2:1)***. This indicates his regret over his impulsive decision to remove her. His nobles proposed that they find a new queen for him by holding a kind of ***"The Bachelor"*** contest. Eligible young virgins from all over the empire would be selected (without their choice to refuse), to contest for the king's favor to become his next queen. This is how the key characters, Mordecai and Esther, entered the story.

“Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai . . . who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon . . . Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died” (2:5-7).

Esther was a lowly Jewish orphan, on the opposite end of the spectrum from Queen Vashti. She had been loved well and trained in wisdom, faith and social graces by her kind ‘adopted father.’ Esther was respectful and obedient to Mordecai, and learned much under his care. When the king’s edict went out for beautiful virgins to be taken into his harem, Esther was chosen. Had she refused to be taken, she probably would have been killed, so she went ‘by faith’ and God’s sovereignty was soon at work in the harem. She was warned by her ‘father’ to not let anyone know that she was a Jewess. She was careful to obey his warning. Each young woman was given one year of beauty treatments before she was taken to the king for a night. Esther was noticed by Hegai who oversaw the harem, and prepared each virgin for the king. Esther quickly won Hegai’s favor and he provided her with extra special beauty treatments, food and 7 maids during the 12-month period of preparation. Hegai’s favor was another example of God’s hand at work for His purposes. When it came time for Esther to be presented to Xerxes, she won his favor and was selected to be his next queen.

“Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther’s banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality” (2:17,18).

Esther was careful to not reveal her nationality as a Jew to Xerxes. Mordecai may have feared that Esther’s Jewish heritage would cause her to be rejected by Xerxes. Mordecai was taken into the king’s service as a guard at the palace gate, keeping his Jewish identity concealed as well. Mordecai’s wisdom and their prudence were key factors later in the events of God’s deliverance.

Mordecai uncovers a plot against Xerxes: 2:19-23

Another key background detail is that *Mordecai overheard a plot by 2 officers to assassinate Xerxes*. He reported this plot to Esther who, in turn, told Xerxes. The assassins were hung on the gallows and Mordecai's role in uncovering this plot was *recorded in the king's books*. Mordecai was not acknowledged for his protection of the king, and would not be honored by the king for 5 more years (6:2,3)! Yet, God's exact timing would reveal His sovereign purpose at a critical point in the narrative.

How often do we all question **"Where are you God?"** when we don't see God 'visibly' at work on our finite clock. Mordecai is a great eg. for us all, of quiet trust and humility. He didn't promote himself to make sure he was honored, nor did he doubt God's justice. He lived out the command written in the N.T. - "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that HE may exalt you at the proper time" (1Peter 5:6). JESUS gave assurance for each of us to claim: "My Father is always working and I myself am also working" (John 5:17). We please God by believing that He is a rewarder of those who wait for Him, but the timing is up to God, not us. We need to humble ourselves and leave the purposes of God with our lives and our loved ones up to His control. Our responsibility is to be humble and thankful that we know that God is at work. Then join Him in praying for what is on our heart. In what areas to you need to release your judgmental attitude towards God? Don't grow weary in prayer! (Luke 18:1)

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews: 3:1-15

Haman was elevated to be the head over *all* the king's officials. People bowed down to Haman; but Mordecai would not bow down, finally revealing his reason: he was a Jew. Haman despised Mordecai wanting revenge toward all the Jewish people.

There is an interesting reason for why Mordecai chose to not bow down to Haman. Haman's was an Amalekite, age-old enemies of the Jews. The Amalekites had attacked the Jews from the rear, when they were vulnerable after 1st arriving in Canaan from Egypt (Ex. 17:8-15). God declared war on them and King Saul (a Benjamite), Israel's 1st king, was to completely eradicate them, but he disobeyed (1Sam.15). Mordecai was also a Benjamite, and most likely was exercising his desire to honor God's command to not be aligned with the Amalekites. (*W. Wiersbe gives great detail in his excellent O.T. History commentary on Esther, p.716*).

Haman began to scheme how he would destroy all the Jews in the entire kingdom; but he needed Xerxes' permission to do so.

Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury" (3:8,9).

Haman was deceitful and exaggerated his facts to make his case to sway Xerxes. He did not tell Xerxes who the 'certain people dispersed throughout the empire' were. This would elevate Xerxes fears and suspicions. Haman made it sound like these people were causing the king trouble all over the empire, which was a lie. In fact, God had commanded the Jews through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:4-7), to settle down in captivity and NOT cause trouble for their rulers. They were obeying this. Xerxes, known for making hasty decisions, was still unaware of Esther's Jewish roots, and signed and sealed the decree authorizing the complete extermination of the Jews on a particular day – the 13th of Adar, (which God's hand was in, giving the Jews a year to prepare). This decree was speedily taken to every one of the 127 provinces in the kingdom informing the Jews of their fate.

Mordecai appeals to Esther for help: 4:1-17

All Jews, including Mordecai, donned sackcloth and ashes as they wailed over the decree announcing their extinction. A report came to Esther concerning Mordecai's mourning, leading her to inquire what was happening. Mordecai reported to Esther concerning Haman's plot. Perhaps God had placed her in her high position to be used "***for such a time as this***". She would have to intercede on behalf of the Jews to save her people.

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS" (4:12-14)?

Previously, Mordecai had commanded Esther to keep her nationality a secret. Now, he told her that it was time to speak up on behalf of her people. Esther responded to Mordecai with honest fear but with great courage and a heart to be used by God. She knew that it would take God's mighty work in Xerxes' heart to receive her when she went to him uninvited.

“Go gather all the Jews in Susa to fast for me. Do not eat or drink for 3 days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I PERISH, I PERISH” (Esther 4:15,16).

Fasting was always accompanied by humbling yourself and confessing sin, and praying that God would see your dependence on Him and desire for His hand, more than food. It is still accepted as the way today.

God delights in using the most 'ordinary' life for His significant purposes. Esther had been in her role as gracious queen for 8 years with no incident. Suddenly, her role to intercede became crucial. She knew she was in that role for the specific opportunity that was before her, to save her people from being annihilated by Haman's vengeance. Never underestimate the importance of your role among other people through all ages and stages of your life. The opportunity to act in faith will present itself IF you are available to be used for God's sovereign purposes. How could your current role be used to serve God's purposes if you are willing? What spiritual discipline is needed to prepare yourself and someone's heart for His work in their life?

Esther approaches Xerxes: 5:1-8

On the third day, Esther approached Xerxes and he gladly welcomed her into his presence. When he asked her to give her request, she invited the king and Haman to a dinner banquet she had prepared for that evening. The king complied and, curiously asked her again what was her request. God's prompting and Esther's intuition must have caused her to sense the timing was not right to raise the grave issue of Haman's plot against her people. She asked that Xerxes and Haman come again the next evening.

Haman's rage against Mordecai: 5:9-14

As Haman departed from the palace, he passed Mordecai who again, did not bow down, causing Haman's rage to strengthen. At

home, he began boasting to his wife and friends about how great he was in the king and queen's sight. Yet, Mordecai's refusal to bow down to honor him was eating him alive!

“But all this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate” (5:13).

His wife Zeresh advised him to use his authority to cruelly execute Mordecai on a 75-foot high gallows the following day. Haman instantly had the gallows constructed.

Four forces were at work against Haman that he was blind to: 1) Divine sovereignty and the power of prayer (leading to Esther's intuition to wait). 2) His false confidence in his position and why he alone was invited with the king. 3) His pride- boasting at home, building the gallows. Pride is God's #1 hatred, Proverbs 6:16-19. 4) Malice: deep-seated hatred that brings delight if our enemy suffers (Wiersbe, O.T. History p.728-732). Things are not always as they appear! “We walk by faith not by sight” (2Cor.5:7).

Mordecai honored by the king: 6:1-14

God's sovereign hand moves to intervene. That same night, king Xerxes couldn't sleep. He ordered his servants to bring the records of his reign and to read to him. They chose to read how Mordecai had saved the king from an assassination plot (2:19-23).

The king realized that Mordecai had never been rewarded. Early in the morning, Haman went to ask the king permission to *execute Mordecai*. First, Xerxes asked Haman an unexpected question:

“What should be done for the man the king delights to honor” (6:6)?

Proudly, Haman supposed that the king was *intending to honor himself!* He replied, the man to be honored should be led through the city *riding the king's horse, wearing the king's robe, with the king's crest on his head.* The king's next command must have rocked Haman to his core:

“Go at once...Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended” (6:10).

Humiliated, Haman did as the king commanded, leading Mordecai on horseback through the city streets. Afterwards . . .

“Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, ‘Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him—you will surely come to ruin!’ While they were still talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet Esther had prepared” (6:12-14).

The plot revealed, Haman executed: 7:1-10

At the 2nd banquet, Xerxes again asked Esther her request of him. She then revealed Haman’s plot to destroy her and her people:

“If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated” (7:3,4).

She pointed to Haman as the instigator of the plot to annihilate the Jews. The king, enraged at Haman’s deceptive plot, walked out of the meeting to compose himself. Meanwhile, Haman fell before Esther to plead for his life.

“Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, ‘Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?’” (7:8).

Haman was speechless. The king commanded that Haman be immediately executed on the same gallows built for Mordecai. He gave Haman’s entire estate to Esther, and his signet ring to Mordecai (8:2), raising Mordecai to Haman’s position (10:3)!

How quickly events can be turned around by God’s sovereign timing. Wise and humble Mordecai was given all the honor and authority of Haman. But his character was able to handle it. Mordecai cared for the well-being of the people, rather than himself. God knows when we are to be noticed, or given a raise, or recognition. It also may not happen till heaven as with many faithful believers. Do you feel you deserve some recognition that you aren’t receiving? Entrust that desire to God, and remember that He is faithful to reward.

The King’s second edict: 8:1-17

The first royal edict, sealed with the king’s signet ring, to destroy

the Jews could not be revoked. Esther pleaded with Xerxes to issue a 2nd royal edict which he was eager to do, granting the Jews the right to arm and defend themselves on the day when their enemies planned to attack and kill them (the 13th of Adar). They had 9 more months to prepare. Mordecai composed the new edict, sealed and sent it quickly to all 127 provinces. There was jubilation among God's people throughout the kingdom.

“For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (8:16,17).

The Feast of Purim established: 9:1-32

As a result of the 2nd decree of Xerxes, the Jews in every province successfully defended themselves against their enemies. This led to the establishment of a new, annual Jewish feast called “Purim” (based on the word “Pur” which means, “to cast the lot”). Haman had “cast the lot” to determine the day for the extermination of the Jews; but God had “reversed the lot” so that the day became one of deliverance for the Jews.

“Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:20-22).

Even to this day, the Feast of Purim is celebrated as a national holiday in Israel.

The exaltation of Mordecai: 10:1-3

The story concludes with the exaltation of Mordecai to 2nd in command in the kingdom of Xerxes.

“Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (10:3).

Summary: The book of Esther shows the interplay between God's sovereign activity and human decisions (good and bad).

1. God's Sovereign Activity on Display

"There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of divine sovereignty." Charles H. Spurgeon (Wiersbe, p.172)

- God is active and in control when He seems to be uninvolved.
- God is faithful, even when it seems that His enemies have usurped His will.
- God is our protector, even when it feels like someone or something is overwhelming us.
- God loves us, even when it seems as if the whole world hates us.
- God delights in humbling the foolish and the proud, and exalting the humble and the wise
- God can cause His people to be noticed and given a place of authority.
- God can direct the thoughts of someone's heart to accomplish His plan.
- God shows His love and involvement even when He disciplines.
- God delights when we fast and pray in dependence on Him.

2. People's Wisdom on Display

- Caring for, or raising the orphans and the vulnerable (Mordecai).
- Obeying our parents when they give us wise advice (Esther).
- Trusting God's protection in difficult circumstances (Esther's year in the harem; Mordecai staying attuned).
- Doing our work well without needing to be honored (Mordecai).
- Having foresight to help another person see their God-given opportunity (Mordecai-Esther was queen for such a time as this).
- Having a 'salting influence' on someone (Esther with Xerxes).
- Having courage to stand for what is right (Vashti, Mordecai).

People's Wisdom cont...

-Having courage to move through fear to faith for the sake of a higher purpose (Esther going before Xerxes without invitation).

-Knowing the power of fasting and prayer and willingly doing it (Esther and all the Jews).

-Knowing the boundary set by God when defending ourselves against an enemy (the Jews didn't initiate fighting, only defended themselves, and they did not plunder those who died).

-Displaying a character that pleases God and influences others-genuine piety, faith, courage, patriotism, compassion, maturity and natural charm (Esther) (*Jensen: Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, p.81*).

-Setting aside days to "remember" and celebrate God's work in our lives (the Jews-Purim).

Discussion Questions

1. Xerxes, Vashti, Mordecai, Esther and Haman are the main people in the account. Who do you identify with and why?
2. What sovereign ways of God encourage you right now in your life-circumstances, and why?
3. What examples from the people of wisdom listed above challenge you? Why?
4. Can you see your God-given purpose in your current role or stage of life? What is it?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 13 – The 1st and 2nd Returns from Captivity
Ezra

Introduction

Among the captives in Persia was Ezra the scribe. He was from a high-priestly lineage extending back to Aaron, the first high priest and brother of Moses. But in his historical setting, Ezra's role as a scribe and teacher of the Law of God was most significant. ***“He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (7:6).*** Ezra's main contribution was to revive the people's interest in the scriptures and call them back to genuine worship of Yahweh and obedience to His covenant, as they returned to their land from captivity and attempted to rebuild their way of life.

The book of Ezra records 2 separate returns from captivity, the first led by Zerubbabel (536 BC) and the second led by Ezra himself (458 BC). A third return would later be led by Nehemiah (445 BC). Chapters 1-6 recount the first return and the effort to rebuild the altar and temple, amidst great opposition. Chapters 7-10 recount the return led by Ezra and his effort to call the post-exilic community back to obedience to the covenant with Yahweh.

EZRA 1-6: THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

The first portion of Ezra's book looks back roughly 60 years to the time when the first wave of Jews returned to Jerusalem from captivity. The focus of the narrative is on the rebuilding of the altar and temple of Yahweh by the returned remnant.

The theme of 'REBUILDING' is throughout the Bible. God is a God of second chances and waits to rebuild life where we have torn it down through our own choices. This theme brings HOPE for us today and for all who have looked to God for a fresh start. Whether we are 'building' God's way, or 'rebuilding' to be back on God's path (like in Pilgrim's Progress), the book of Ezra gives us hope and instruction.

God moves King Cyrus' heart to release the Jews: Ch.1

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel would come out of captivity (Isa.44:28; Jeremiah 25:1-14; 29:10), before Cyrus, king of Persia was even born! Ezra records Cyrus' decree, allowing the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (536 BC). Cyrus acknowledged that God had put it in his heart to decree the rebuilding of Yahweh's house in Jerusalem.

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (1:2).

A large freewill offering was made by the captivity Jews in Persia to support their brethren who were returning to Jerusalem. In addition, Cyrus returned all the precious vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple when he captured the city decades earlier. By His sovereign providence, God persevered all the temple vessels (even much gold) by the powerful gentile world rulers and caused it all to be returned back to Jerusalem.

It bears repeating that God is ALWAYS WORKING! He disciplines nations and individuals in His love and is always watching out for those who want to trust Him. Throughout the entire captivity, God was using the 5 prominent kings of the ruling world empire: Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes to literally declare that Yahweh was the "GOD OF HEAVEN", and all peoples should worship Him. He put a concern for God's people in their hearts, and ensured the return of the temple articles for worship. We constantly need the favor, permission or partnership of authorities to accomplish tasks in life. How has God used authorities to help you advance in your life? Pray to God for the well-being of your authorities and families, and to prepare them for their blessings to be upon you and your endeavors, as Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah and countless others did.

God moves the hearts of the returnees: Ch.2

Roughly 50,000 people made the 4-month, 900-mile journey back to Jerusalem. **Zerubbabel** (also called Sheshbazzar), a descendant of King David, was their leader and governor (they were not allowed to have a "king" since they were still subject to Persian rule). Zerubbabel appears in the genealogical lines of Christ (Matthew 1:12,13 through Joseph, and Luke 3:27 through Mary). He was given two great promises through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah: 1) The Spirit of God would enable him to rebuild the

temple, in spite of mountain-like obstacles (Zechariah 4:6-10). 2) The kingdom of God would someday be built through the descendant (Messiah) of Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:21-23). This great leader was God's chosen servant to restore His people to the worship of Yahweh. He foreshadowed Jesus Christ by helping save His people from captivity, bringing them back to God.

The emphasis in this list of returnees fell upon the Levites and priests who had the credentials to serve in the temple. The people 1st returned to their own towns of ancestry and settled their families, then they went to Jerusalem to care of God's business.

The exiles build an altar and worship first: 3:1-7

The first order of business was to build an altar on which the people could offer burnt offerings for their sins to God (3:1-3). Abraham had built an altar when he first entered the Promised Land (Genesis 12:7). They knew they 1st needed the forgiveness of God and then the favor of God on their efforts to rebuild from the rubble of captivity. Jerusalem was little more than a heap of burnt ruins and rubble when they arrived.

“So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening” (3:3).

They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles for 7 days as they prepared their hearts for the task ahead. This feast celebrated God's favor and protection over Israel during the 40 years in the desert after coming out of Egypt. Now, the people were in another “desert” – the ruins of post-captivity Jerusalem.

The Jews needed God's protection from the opposition. Yet, they 1st offered burnt offerings humbly requesting His protection. Moses taught the Israelites to 1st focus on this offering, 'If any of you... lay your hand on the head of the male animal, it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you...' (Lev. 1:2-5) We need to realize that God is holy. He welcomes us to pray for anything, yet He cannot go against His own nature to ignore our offenses (sins) against Him and others. They sought God's forgiveness 1st before they sought His protection. How have you offended God, or your spouse, child, relative, friend or coworker? Take time to ask God to search your heart, and admit (confess) to Him what comes to your mind. Then once your spirit feels a sense of forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9), offer your prayers and requests to Him.

The Temple foundation laid (with mixed feelings): 3:8-13

About 14 months after their return, the people began to rebuild the temple. When the foundation was laid, there were mixed feelings.

“And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away” (3:11-13).

The younger people looked forward with joy and anticipation. But the older crowd looked back with sadness and regret. The “glory days” of Solomon’s great temple and kingdom were long gone.

The temple that was rebuilt was much smaller than the one that King Solomon had built, such a disappointment to those who had seen the former magnificent one. God sent a word through the prophet Zechariah, ‘Who despises the day of small things?’ (Zech 4:10) Culture values bigger, better, more prestigious etc... but GOD values the heart, sincerity and humble devotion to Him, even if it is smaller, less impressive, less of a ‘wow’. Do NOT be ashamed (despise) when God starts a ‘re-do’, a work- over in your life. A ‘RE-DO’ done His way. Don’t be ashamed, and don’t be regretting the ‘do-over’ that God is up to in you! He is delighted to start afresh and rebuild a ‘new thing’ in you. He has allowed perhaps a ‘discipline’ or ‘learning process’ for a season- “the WALL” as Peter Scazzero says. Now His approach is ‘smaller’, less ‘wow’, or to you- ‘less-significant’. Take courage! It will be a much better work, and a testimony to His gracious hand at work in you, so give HIM the glory. That is what matters.

Opposition halts the Temple project: Ch.4

No sooner had the work begun than opposition arose from the Samaritans in the land. When the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel (722 BC), they did not deport the entire population. Instead, they *imported* other ethnicities into Israel so as to destroy the pure bloodline of Israel and create a mixed race. These “part-Jews” became known as the “Samaritans” (since they dwelt in the region of Samaria). It was these Samaritans who came to Zerubbabel asking to take part in the rebuilding of the temple.

But Zerubbabel and company rejected their participation, knowing that they had continued to worship other gods during the previous two centuries and they were not fully devoted to Yahweh.

When the Samaritans were prevented from participating, they made every effort to oppose and halt the Temple project.

“Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:4,5).

They managed to persuade Artaxerxes, king of Persia, that the Jews had a history of being a rebellious people and that this temple project was really the beginning of their attempt to form their own nation and rebel from Persian rule. Artaxerxes was persuaded by this argument and ordered the work to be stopped.

“Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:24).

For roughly 16 years the temple-project sat dormant. During this period, the people focused on building their own personal houses with the timber that had been collected for the temple, while neglecting work on the temple of God. Haggai the prophet confronted the people for putting their personal interests before the work of God, even using what was donated to God.

The book of Ezra (and many others) shows how doing God's will can often bring opposition. Trials don't mean that God is not involved, rather the opposite. So, we should expect it. The Apostle Peter reminded the believers in the early church to “not be surprised at the painful trial you are going through, as if some strange thing were happening to you...” (1Peter 4:12). Satan, the adversary is behind opposition against God's work specifically (1 Peter 5:8,9). Opposition often brings fear from the intimidation and a desire to give up. What kind of opposition causes you to be intimidated and want to give up? How does Ezra warn you and encourage you to be courageous, and keep moving forward?

God's Prophets inspire a re-start: 5:1-6:12

It was the combined voices of Haggai and Zechariah, the two great post-exilic prophets, that stirred the hearts of the people to overcome their fears, reorder their priorities, and to resume work on the temple.

“When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Joshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them” (5:1,2).

As before, opponents arose to stop the project by appealing to the new king, Darius, to issue a stop-work order. But Darius made a careful search and found the original decree of king Cyrus commanding the Jews to return and rebuild their Temple, thus he issued a decree forbidding anyone to interfere with the work. In fact, the full expenses for the work would be funded by the taxes paid to the king by the opponents of the project!

What are the ‘old tapes’ or ‘messages’ you heard growing up that occasionally stop you from moving forward when discouragement comes? “I am not good enough, smart enough, wealthy enough, pretty enough, desirable enough... they are right.” God’s Word offers TRUE WORDS that God speaks over us, rather than what people have spoken over us. Even in the present, negative words will tear us down and stop us from pressing through the hardship/opposition. What words tend to discourage you? What words from God most encourage you to keep pressing forward in life when you most feel like quitting?

The Temple completed/Passover celebrated: 6:13-22

The completion of the temple took 4-5 more years. Then the people came together for a Passover celebration to celebrate all that God had done to bring them this far.

“And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (6:22).

EZRA 7-10: BACK TO THE COVENANT!

The second part of the book records how Ezra led a 2nd smaller wave of returnees back to Jerusalem 60 years later (roughly 1,500 men, plus the women and children). When he returned, he found the community in need of instruction in the Word of God (specifically, the stipulations of the covenant with Yahweh on the dangers of intermarriage with foreigners).

Ezra's life was exemplary, to the Gentile kings Darius 1 and Artaxerxes whom he ministered in Persia under, but also to the Jews living in captivity with him. He was first and foremost a man truly devoted to the knowledge and practice of the Law of Moses in his own personal life, not neglecting prayer and fasting, being humble and fully dependent on his God. But second, he was devoted to teaching it and challenging his fellow Jews to obey it as he did. He was a man whom God could use. However, Ezra continuously gave his powerful, sovereign God all glory and credit for the many circumstances that worked out. "For the gracious hand of God was upon us..."

Ezra's heart for God's Word: 7:1-10

Ezra is introduced as having a significant *high-priestly lineage*. Yet, there is no record of him functioning in the role of high priest. Instead, he is highlighted as a *scribe learned in the laws of God*. He became the preeminent *teacher of God's Word* in the post-exilic period of Israel's history.

"For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10).

The phrase, "*set his heart*" denotes a determined decision. Ezra had determined that he would spend his life bringing people into contact with God's Word. Specifically, he determined to: **1) Study the Law of the Lord.** He made sure that he had a thorough understanding of God's Word himself. **2) Practice it.** He determined to apply God's Word to his own life. He would practice what he would preach. **3) Teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.** He would faithfully communicate God's Word to God's people. King Artaxerxes knew about Ezra's devotion to the Word of God and respected him for it.

Culture throughout the ages has always presented alternatives to loving God and living according to His Word- which has been written for our good. Without a determined effort to be personally studying, and in a study of God's Word with others, you will drift along with the culture of your day which will be away from God's truths. Being in a community with others who really want to take God seriously and who are daily attempting to live out God's Word is essential. Who are you studying God's Word with? Have you set your heart to be a man/woman of God's Word?

Artaxerxes decree permitting Ezra to return: 7:11-28

As with the earlier Cyrus decree to Zerubbabel, so Artaxerxes issued a decree permitting Ezra to lead a 2nd wave of people who were willing to go back to Jerusalem. The king sent a great deal of gold with Ezra to support the rebuilding effort, including restoring obedience to the laws for worship and civil life that pleased God. Like Darius, Artaxerxes asked that perhaps his favor toward the Jews would bring back a blessing from the **‘God of heaven’**, upon his people and his family. The specific purpose of the decree was to grant Ezra permission to go back and *instruct the post-exilic community* in the laws of God.

“And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment” (7:25-26).

Ezra leads the 2nd return, relying upon God: Ch.8

Ezra knew that the 4-month, 900-mile journey to Jerusalem would be difficult. Yet, he had been telling king Artaxerxes how great and powerful his God, Yahweh, was. Therefore, instead of asking the king for troops to protect them, and the gold entrusted to him, he called a day of prayer and fasting so that they could seek the protection of God.

There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask Him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, “The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to Him, but His great anger is against all who forsake Him.” So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and He answered our prayer (Ezra 8:21-23).

God answered the prayers of His people on their difficult journey.

“The hand of our God was on us, and He protected us from enemies and bandits along the way” (8:31).

The phrase “the hand of God” appears 6 times in Ezra (7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31). *“If we had interviewed Ezra and asked him the secret of his successful life, he would have said humbly, “The good hand of the Lord was upon me.” (W. Wiersbe)*

Ezra was a humble man of faith and integrity. He did his part in living out a life of devotion and faithfulness to God, yet he always wanted GOD to be put on display as the One who was GOOD and who caused all the circumstances to work out. Do you tend to take the credit for ways that you appear to be succeeding? We need to remember that God is the One who endows us with a brain, an opportunity, a talent, a spiritual gift, a family, the country we were born in, favor before an authority etc... Ezra knew that apart from God's good and gracious hand upon himself and his people, they would not be in the place of blessing and protection that they were.

The godly leadership of Ezra has left a legacy of faith from his day until the present. God was pleased to show the gentile king and the people setting out on their journey that He is beyond able to protect and bless those whose hearts are sincerely dependent upon Him

NOTE: Just as Ezra was dependent upon God's hand of protection as he and the 2nd group of people began their long journey, we as Oak Pointe Church established an annual tradition in late January 1997, that was named the “EZRA 8 DAY”. It was 1st celebrated on the eve of being commissioned to start the new church. Like Ezra, (Ezra 8:21), a day of fasting, confessing, and humbly focusing our dependence upon God was begun. Annually, OPC has stopped, given thanks, and affirmed that the coming year would only be fruitful and safe if the gracious hand of God would be upon us.

Ezra confronts the inter-marriage problem: Chs.9,10

The final 2 chapters record Ezra's confrontation with the post-exilic community over the sin of intermarriage. When the Israelites first came into the land of Canaan, God had forbidden the men from taking foreign wives, lest their wives turn their hearts away from devotion to Yahweh to serve their idols. (This teaches something of the responsibility of men to love God as their 1st love, because of their tendency to love their women and their women's preferences spiritually more than they love God. King Solomon was the #1 culprit of this. Not a point against women here, but rather that it is harder to be devoted to God whom men don't see, than to women

whom they do see). This is precisely what happened, and why Israel fell into the sin of idolatry in the first place (leading to their eventual expulsion from the land). Now, in the post-exilic community, the same pattern was repeating. Roughly 100 leaders among the people had divorced their Hebrew wives to marry the local foreign women. (Malachi the prophet confronted the issue of Jewish men divorcing their wives to marry foreigners.) Ezra's reaction to this leadership sin was to fall upon the mercy of God.

“When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice” (9:3,4).

Ezra confessed the sins of the people before God (9:5-15). He poured out his heart acknowledging the sin of the people who were in danger of squandering God's gift in allowing them to return from captivity. They were repeating the sins that had caused the discipline and captivity in the 1st place. As he prayed, people gathered around him to openly confess their sins along with him (10:1). Then, the people took an oath to send away their foreign wives. All the people were called to Jerusalem and commanded to send their foreign wives (and children) back to their homelands. While this correction could not be accomplished in a few days, Ezra appointed leaders in every city to oversee the process of holding every man accountable to dismiss his foreign wife. It took three months for all the cases of intermarriage to be dealt with among the post-exilic community.

Attraction is so easy and ‘natural’ causing a pattern of compromise that leads to ultimate pain. Following the commands of God in faithfulness is a much less travelled road, as it requires a deep love for God and a conviction that His ways are the way to walk in, whether they ‘feel good’ or not. Where are YOU compromising God’s Word, to satisfy your own more ‘natural’ way of wanting to do life and feel good? Is it relational, educational, recreational, social; regarding your integrity, your health, your family, your job, your marriage or friendships, or...? Be honest with yourself. Ask God to reveal what He sees that you may not see. Once you admit what you see, what steps will you take to undo the compromise that you are in? The 1st step is to admit it to God and to another person who can help hold you accountable to ‘rebuild’, which is a key theme of the book of Ezra.

Note: The Bible books historically coinciding with Ezra are Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. As these are studied, a more complete portrait of the people's hearts, choices, consequences and applications for us today will be understood. God's Word is written for our instruction to challenge and teach us to walk in His ways. May we all seriously take His Word to heart, like Ezra- to STUDY, APPLY IT, and TEACH IT, by our life and our example to others.

Discussion Questions

(You can review the boxes in the commentary for additional discussion points.)

1. The first part of the book of Ezra is a story of trusting God in the process of rebuilding. There are many lessons we can learn here as we seek to work with God to build, or re-build aspects of our lives today. What lesson/principle stands out most to you from the story of the Jews trying to rebuild their way of life and temple?
2. The second part of the book focuses on Ezra and how God used him as a leader in the post-exilic period. He was many things: a man of the word & prayer, a courageous leader, a witness to the king, a teacher, a priest. How has God used Ezra to challenge and inspire your life?
3. The "hand of God" is repeatedly mentioned in Ezra. This is a metaphor for the protection, favor and blessing of God upon a person or a movement. How have you experienced the hand of God in your own life? How do you need the hand of God right now?

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 14 – The Building of the Wall
Nehemiah

Introduction

Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament before the 400 silent years. It tells of the return of Nehemiah to Jerusalem, about 12 years after Ezra returned, to exhort the people to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a great man of God, filled with the Spirit and with tremendous faith, courage and passion. He embodied some of the greatest leadership principles found anywhere in Scripture as he led a struggling nation to overcome opposition in the rebuilding of their city and the great wall around it, their culture and, most importantly, their relationship with Yahweh.

Aside from showcasing the character of Nehemiah, the story reveals the faithfulness of God toward His people. In spite of their sins and repeated straying from His covenant, He graciously forgave them and allowed them to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. And after they rebuilt and continued to stray from God, He was faithful to give them chance after chance to return to Him.

The story reminds us of the close connection between Israel's national life and their spiritual life. They truly were called to be "one nation under God." They could only maintain a healthy civil life as they walked in fellowship with Yahweh, following His moral and spiritual laws. Thus, Nehemiah helped Israel rebuild their wall; but more importantly, he helped them rebuild their walk with God – the true key to their security and success as a nation.

The book has two parts: The rebuilding of the wall (1:1 – 7:3) and the rebuilding of the spiritual life of the people (7:4 – 13:31).

REBUILDING THE WALL: 1:1 – 7:3

1) A leader feels deeply for people and asks God to move: Ch.1

The book opens with Nehemiah serving King Artaxerxes as his personal cup-bearer, an important position. Yet when his brother Hanani returned from Jerusalem he initiated a concerned inquiry as

to how the Jews were doing and the state of the city. He was told about the desperate conditions back in Jerusalem; the walls and gates were broken down and the people were in great trouble. Nehemiah's reaction was to sit down and weep. He immediately fasted for several days before uttering any prayers! Nehemiah modeled for us that it only takes ONE faithful person who truly cares and wants to make a difference. A short summary of his prayers was recorded. After confessing the sins of the nation who continued to desert their God, he recalled God's precious unconditional promises to His people, and asked Him to remember them at this crucial time.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to Me and obey My commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for My Name.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand”(1:8-10).

He asked God to hear his prayer and grant him favor with the king. Nehemiah prayed his way through every leadership decision he made in this story!

“Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man” (1:11).

Nehemiah modeled 2 principles of prayer: 1) Silence and fasting followed by humility and confession (1Jn 1:9). 2) Citing the promises of God back to God. When we affirm God's own words, and stand on them in faith, we are “praying according to His will” (1Jn 5:3,14,15). A healthy prayer life is always preceded by a healthy knowledge of the Word of God. The more that you know about the character, the ways, and the promises of God, the more effective you will be in talking to God about the issues of life. Jesus put it like this: “If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). What are you praying for/about right now? Find some verses in the Bible where you can literally pray them back to God. When we pray scripture, then our heart becomes attuned to God's own heart and desires. Then God is pleased to answer!

2) A leader moves in faith based on deep convictions: 2:1-10

As cupbearer to the king, it was improper for Nehemiah to be sad in the king's presence. He was caught by surprise when Artaxerxes reprimanded him for his unhappy demeanor. Nehemiah uttered a quick prayer to God and then made a huge ask of the king:

“If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it” (2:5).

He also asked for: 1) Letters to the governors insuring his safe conduct to Jerusalem and 2) authority to be given timber necessary to reconstruct the city gates. Not only did the king grant all his requests, he also sent army troops to protect Nehemiah on the way.

“And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests” (2:8).

He gave God the glory for answering his many days of prayer and fasting! Yet, this did not mean the task would be easy. Two people made life incredibly difficult for Nehemiah: Sanballat and Tobiah, foreigners who were “officials” in the regions around Jerusalem.

Just because God is “answering our prayers,” this does not mean that there will be no challenges or difficulties in the journey ahead. In fact, trials are always part of God’s ways to grow our faith, sharpen our character, increase our hope and experience more of God’s love (Romans 5:3-5). More significantly, we can display God’s character to those around us who don’t know Him personally. If you have been pursuing God’s agenda, and you are encountering difficulties, do not assume you have made a mistake and turn back. It often means that you are pushing back on evil, so opponents will push back on you. Present your needs to God and allow Him to help you move forward.

3) A leader assesses the situation and forms a strategy: 2:11-20

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he first quietly surveyed the damage. He did this alone, at night, without telling any of his fellow Jews what God had put on his heart. Once he had privately assessed the state of Jerusalem, he presented the problems, and challenged the people to trust his lead.

“You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of

Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, “Let us arise and build!” So they began this good work (2:17,18).

The opponents Sanballat and Tobiah appeared again, mocking their plans and belittling their power to accomplish them. Nehemiah responded wisely and firmly:

“The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it” (2:20).

Nehemiah exercised wisdom in knowing WHEN and HOW to cast vision to his fellow Jews. He knew it would have been premature to simply walk back into town and announce grandiose plans to people who had been struggling for decades. After he had privately gathered information about the conditions and assessed the task ahead, he was prepared to have a vision-casting conversation with key leaders. He also brought God’s sovereign hand into the foreground, making it clear that God had already begun to move on behalf of this vision. No wonder the leaders responded with faith: “Let us arise and build!”

4) A leader unleashes the power of teamwork: Ch.3

Nehemiah took the time to acknowledge everyone who joined in the work. A few details stand out in the list of workers:

- Everyone from priests, to perfume-makers, to goldsmiths helped.
- Some noblemen refused to help (3:5).
- Shallum built with the help of his daughters (3:12).
- Some groups repaired bigger sections of the wall (3:13).
- Baruch worked with exceptional zeal (3:20).
- Many built right near where their houses were located.

A great task requires a great army of workers. But workers need to be placed in the most effective positions so that they will remain highly motivated. Workers need to be appreciated for their efforts so that they feel valued. It is also significant that Nehemiah knew people by name. He did not “objectify” people as means to an end. He saw them as real people with real lives. I am sure that as he walked by them every day, they felt loved and inspired by their leader. Who do you have charge over? What can you learn from the example of Nehemiah? What role are you playing in building the kingdom of God through Oak Pointe Church? What part of “the wall” are you building in this season of your life?

5) A leader doesn't let opposition distract from the goal: Ch.4

Once Sanballat and Tobiah saw that the Jews were moving into action, they increased their attacks. They used ridicule and belittling to discourage Nehemiah and company. In turn, Nehemiah resorted to prayer:

“Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads . . . for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders” (4:4,5).

Soon, the wall reached half its height, ***“for the people worked with all their heart” (4:6).***

Next, the opponents became angry and plotted to physically disrupt the workers (4:7,8).

“But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (4:9).

Then, the opponents made death-threats (4:11,12). Nehemiah increased security measures *and* gave an encouraging word to the project managers:

After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes” (4:14).

Nehemiah both inspired and equipped his work force. They were prepared to fight with the sword in one hand and to lay another brick with the other hand . . . depending on the need of the moment.

“Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked” (4:17,18).

Nehemiah combined “doing God’s work” with the practical necessities of “being prepared to fight.” We so often make the mistake of creating a divide between secular and sacred activities. But every “work” is sacred, when it is carried out under the watchful eye of God, in obedience to His commands. What might it look like today for you to hold ‘a sword’ in one hand (practical, common-sense measures) and ‘a brick’ in the other hand (building God’s kingdom)? Can you think of modern parallels?

6) A leader cares for all people under his/her authority: Ch.5

Nehemiah was more than a wall-builder; he was a social activist. When he learned that the poor were being taken advantage of by rich in the returned community, he immediately took action. He was angered by the fact that Jews who had been released from bondage in Persia were now being placed in financial bondage by their own fellow Jews! He demanded that high-interest debts be forgiven and confiscated land returned immediately.

“I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!” At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised (5:12,13).

Through all of his actions, Nehemiah showed a true heart for the welfare of people. He was not just into projects; it was the people and their well-being that mattered. He was hard on those who abused people for selfish gain. In what ways might God use you to fight for the needs and rights of the disadvantaged? Is there some cause He is placing before you, where you can make a difference in this world?

7) A leader knows that personal integrity is essential: 6:1-14

Sanballat and Tobiah saw that they could not keep the wall from going up; so they tried to bring Nehemiah down. They tried to meet with him to ambush him; but he would not go. They tried to accuse him of mounting a campaign to make himself king of Israel; but he told them they were spreading fake news. Then, they hired one of Nehemiah’s trusted friends to lure him to sleep in the temple so that he would escape a murder-plot; but Nehemiah discerned they were trying to snare him into sin so that his name and character would be discredited (only priests could live inside the temple). Nehemiah, as always, brought his enemies and his problems to God in prayer:

“Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me” (6:14).

8) A leader perseveres until the job is completed: 6:15 – 7:3

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days” (6:15).

Fifty-two days! That’s all it took for the people to rebuild the entire wall around Jerusalem. What a display of God’s powerful help and people’s faithful, dedicated work. A lot can happen in a short amount of time when God and people decide to *move together*. Meanwhile, the opposition was *losing strength*.

“When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (6:16).

Once the wall was completed, Nehemiah made sure it worked efficiently. He gave great attention to detail, appointing gatekeepers, musicians, priests, district officers and city leaders to make sure the security of the city was efficient. Most importantly, he appointed men of integrity who revered the Lord to key positions:

“I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do” (7:2).

Nehemiah’s attention to detail makes it clear that he was doing his work for the glory of God. The apostle Paul wrote: ***“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23,24).*** Nehemiah led a building project and governed the people. How does Nehemiah’s example inspire you concerning the work God has given you to do?

REBUILDING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE: 7:4 – 13:31

The wall completed, now the story turns to how Nehemiah worked to insure the healthy functioning of the spiritual/moral life of the returned community. It is one thing to have a city built. It is another thing to have a city full of people who are walking in God’s ways.

9) A leader puts the right people in the right place: 7:4-73

God put it on Nehemiah’s heart to search out the genealogical

records of the original group of returnees under Zerubbabel. (The list in Nehemiah 7 corresponds with the list in Ezra 2.) His reason was to make sure that the city was populated with legitimate Jews who could prove their birthright. He also had a longer-term goal of bringing balance to the urban-rural distribution. His goal was that 1 out of every 10 families would settle inside the city of Jerusalem (see 11:1,2). As Matthew Henry said: *It is one thing to properly build a city. It is another thing to properly people a city.*

10) A leader teaches people the truth, yet with grace: Ch.8

Here is the story of an amazing national convocation, declared by Nehemiah and led by Ezra. The purpose was to bring the people back under the hearing of God's Word and obedience to it.

“So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion” (8:3,4).

Due to the long captivity in Babylon/Persia, many Jews had lost their aptitude in the Hebrew language. Thus, teachers and interpreters had to help them properly understand God's Word.

“The Levites . . . instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read” (8:7,8).

Once they understood the meaning, people began to weep over what they were hearing (likely the original covenant with Yahweh, including the blessings and curses associated with it). The leaders encouraged the people, in spite of the heaviness of the message:

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve” (8:10,11).

On the following day, Ezra had a special reading time with the leaders of Israel. They found the original command concerning the

Feast of Booths (Leviticus 23:33-40); a clear indicator that they were reading the books of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy). They immediately obeyed by calling for a nation-wide Feast of Booths celebration. Ezra publicly read God’s Word each day.

“So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great” (8:16,17).

We have already studied Ezra’s personal commitment to be a man of God’s Word (Ezra 7:10). Now we see him calling the entire nation to hear and heed God’s Word. People did not own personal copies of the Bible in that day, so the way they heard the word of God read, was in public settings, such as this one. Paul wrote to the young pastor, Timothy, “Give attention to the public reading of Scripture” (1Timothy 4:13). In what settings are you able to read the Word of God aloud in a group? If you’ve never done this before, give it a try. After you’ve read the Word of God, discuss as a group what it means and how it personally impacts you.

11) A leader admits past sins and asks for God’s mercy: Ch.9

All of chapter 9 is a prayer – the longest prayer recorded in the Bible – and it has only one focus: recounting the nation’s sins and confessing them. The nation gathered 24 days after Ezra began reading the Scriptures to them. Led by the Levitical priests, they poured out their hearts to God.

“They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God” (9:3).

The major portion of the prayer (9:5-31) is a recounting of God’s dealings with rebellious Israel from the day they came out of Egypt until the present (roughly 1,000 years). God was faithful and merciful, though His people repeatedly refused to walk in His ways. The last section (9:32-37) was a plea for God to take notice of their current needs and to mercifully watch over them as they sought to rebuild.

Why so much confession of sin? Because sin hinders our fellowship with God, and blocks His power flowing in our lives. Confession re-opens the connection between humans and God. The Bible teaches that the sins of our forefathers pass down and impact up to four generations. Recognizing, naming, admitting and repenting of the sins that still show up in us and our children and grandchildren is Biblical. Take time to seriously do this, on a small scale of family sins (like deceit, affairs, addictions, anger, stubbornness, lethargy, pride etc). And even ask forgiveness of people-groups whom our forefathers have sinned against, and other social sins of our forefathers; these are not trite to God. He is ready to break generational patterns so that the future generations can live in freedom. Once you have confessed, you can thank God for His forgiveness, which He bestows immediately upon those who confess (see Psalm 32 and 1John 1:9).

12) A leader solemnizes his/her commitments: 9:38 – 10:39

The leaders signed a document outlining their commitment to walk in obedience to the covenant with Yahweh.

“. . . all these now join their fellow Israelites the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord” (10:29).

Although words on paper do not determine behavior, it is good to inscribe our commitments for all to see. This not only solemnizes our personal decision to walk with God, it also holds us accountable in the sight of others who witness our “vows.” Is there some significant commitment that you need to make to God that could be put into writing, with witnesses looking on?

13) A leader has a long-term view of success: 11:1 – 12:26

As noted earlier (ch.7), Nehemiah wanted to insure the city of Jerusalem was populated with true Jews who were committed to walking in obedience to the covenant with Yahweh. The lists in chs. 11 and 12 were intended to make a public record of those who were chosen to live within the newly restored city walls.

14) A leader celebrates the wins with the team: 12:27-47

Two large choirs sang as they walked in opposite direction around the top of the new wall. They then met in the temple and continued praising God for all that had been accomplished.

“The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away” (12:42,43).

15) A leader keeps pointing people to God’s agenda: Ch.13

After staying 12 years in Jerusalem (compare 2:1 with 13:6) Nehemiah returned to Artaxerxes in Persia. After a short time there, he was granted permanent leave to return to continue as the governor of Jerusalem. When he arrived back in Jerusalem, he was shocked to find that Eliashib the High Priest had given Tobiah the Ammonite (the former great enemy of Nehemiah and the wall building effort) a large room to reside in inside of the temple – the very room that was supposed to be used to store the supplies given by the people to support the priests who served in the temple! As a result, the priests had quit working in the temple and returned to their own private homes and fields to survive!!

“I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense. I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and musicians responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. So I rebuked the officials and asked them, “Why is the house of God neglected?” (13:8-11).

The Jews had strayed in many ways during Nehemiah’s brief absence. They were doing business on the Sabbath day instead of resting. Their city was turned into a market-place for trading on God’s holy day! Just as Jesus would overturn the tables of the money-changers in the temple, Nehemiah quickly put a stop to all the merchandising in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. He stationed guards to keep people from entering the city with merchandise on the Sabbath.

He also found the practice of intermarriage flourishing again. The men were marrying Philistine, Ammonite and Moabite women. The children of these unions could not even speak the Hebrew language! Even the High Priest’s son had married the daughter of Sanballat, Nehemiah’s lifelong enemy! Suffice it to say that Nehemiah the reformer went to his grave trying to reform post-exilic Israel and keep them from repeating the same old sins.

Discussion Questions:

The Bible puts this faithful leader Nehemiah on display for all who aspire to have anyone follow them. There are so many principles to learn from, both as a follower and as a leader! Review the 15 principles below and discuss with your group the ones that you feel are most significant to you right now.

- 1) A leader feels deeply for people and asks God to move: Ch.1**
- 2) A leader moves in faith based on deep convictions: 2:1-10**
- 3) A leader assesses the situation and forms a strategy: 2:11-20**
- 4) A leader unleashes the power of teamwork: Ch.3**
- 5) A leader doesn't let opposition distract from the goal: Ch.4**
- 6) A leader cares for all people under his/her authority: Ch.5**
- 7) A leader knows that personal integrity is essential: 6:1-14**
- 8) A leader perseveres until the job is completed: 6:15 – 7:3**
- 9) A leader puts the right people in the right place: 7:4-73**
- 10) A leader teaches people the truth, yet with grace: Ch.8**
- 11) A leader admits past sins and asks for God's mercy: Ch.9**
- 12) A leader solemnizes his/her commitments: 9:38 – 10:39**
- 13) A leader has a long-term view of success: 11:1 – 12:26**
- 14) A leader celebrates the wins with the team: 12:27-47**
- 15) A leader keeps pointing people to God's agenda: Ch.13**

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 15 – God Remembers
Zechariah

Introduction

Zechariah, a contemporary of Haggai, was a *priest and a prophet* to the post-exilic Jewish community as they tried to rebuild their way of life after the captivity. The name Zechariah means “God remembers.” This was a fitting name for a prophet at this point in Israel’s history for several reasons: 1) God remembered His people in captivity and brought them back to their land. 2) God remembered His promises to Israel’s forefathers and would move to fulfill those ancient promises. 3) God remembered Israel’s track record of disobedience and warned them not to repeat the sins of the past.

The key historical event that moved God to speak through Zechariah (and Haggai) was the rebuilding of the temple after 16 years of neglecting this work (see Ezra 5:1; 6:14). While the rebuilding of the temple formed the central theme of Haggai’s messages, the temple was more of a backdrop for Zechariah’s messages. God inspired Zechariah to challenge the people to examine their hearts and sincerely love God, not merely rebuild a temple and a ‘religion’ (eg. their ritual of fasting Ch.7). Zechariah was given 8 prophetic visions and several messages concerning the future of Israel and God’s firm plans to establish His final kingdom. However, Zechariah was also given the privilege of speaking the most (except for Isaiah), about *the coming Messiah* who would first suffer and forgive sin, but later reign as the Millennial King. Just as the people of Zechariah’s day were challenged and encouraged, we too can receive hope that God is on His throne, and keeps His promises. We must remain faithful to trust Him with our lives, and pursue a deeper relationship with Him.

The book of Zechariah has 3 basic sections:

Introduction: 1:1-6

Visions of the Future: 1:7 – 6:15

Messages about the Future: 7:1 – 14:21

Introduction: 1:1-6

“Return to Me, that I may return to you!”

Zechariah opened with the “reciprocal principle.” God said to His people: *If you do X, then I will respond with Y.* (See also Zechariah 7:13; James 4:8). The word “return” is the O.T. parallel to the N.T. word “repent,” signifying a heart-desire to turn back to God. (See the following passages where God calls His people to return to Him: Deut.4:30,31; 2Chron.30:6-9; Jer.3:6-10; 3:11-15; 3:21-23; Joel 2:12-14.) In Zechariah, the call to return formed the foundation for all that God wanted to say. The people had physically returned to their land from captivity; but a full return to the Lord with their hearts would determine whether they lived under God’s blessing in the future, or would continue to experience His hand of discipline.

Note that the example of “the fathers” is mentioned 4 times in the opening 6 verses. God was warning the post-exilic community that their fate would be the same as their predecessors if they failed to walk closely to Him. Zechariah’s introductory section has one overriding message to the people: *Give heed to the Word of God and you will be spared from the wrath of God!*

History holds valuable lessons for those who choose to study it and heed it. Yet, sadly, history proves that we do not learn from history! The entire O.T. historical narrative was recorded for this very reason, to give us lessons to learn from and live by (note Romans 15:4; 1Corinth.10:11). The O.T. has been rich in the recounting of people’s convictions, choices and outcomes, but also those of the nations and empires. As we near the end of our study of the O.T. history, what are some major lessons that you have learned that you will take into the future (positive and negative lessons)?

Visions of the Future: 1:7 – 6:15

Many prophets were given visions that conveyed God’s messages. Zechariah is unusual in that the entire first half of the book is a sequence of 8 visions. After each vision Zechariah asked God questions about the visions. The answers he received are the interpretations that follow.

1. Horses on patrol: 1:7-17

“These are those whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth” (1:10).

God has His patrol out taking stock of conditions on the earth. In this vision, the report back to God was that the surrounding nations were peaceful and at rest. Yet, the nation Israel was not at rest, due to the hardship of captivity and now trying to rebuild. God's message was that He was exceedingly jealous for the welfare of His people. He promised compassion toward His people, while at the same time promising judgment upon the nations that went too far inflicting pain upon Israel.

Sometimes we may feel as if God does not know about the things that are happening to us. Yet, He does know . . . everything. You might want to stop and pray, thanking God that He has His patrolmen out right now, surveying your situation and reporting back to Him so to speak. God never misses a beat. What a comfort, especially when it seems like life is getting the upper hand on us.

2. Horns and Craftsmen: 1:18-21

“These are the horns which have scattered Judah so that no man lifts up his head; but these craftsmen have come to terrify them, to throw down the horns of the nations who have lifted up their horns against the land of Judah in order to scatter it” (1:21).

The 4 horns represented the 4 world powers that had dominated Israel (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia). The 4 craftsmen represented the 4 world powers appointed by God to bring judgment upon the 4 horns (each successive kingdom brought down the previous one (Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece). Daniel the prophet also spoke of 4 kingdoms (Dan. 2:31-45 and 7:1 – 8:28). The point? While God was using world powers to discipline Israel, His people had been oppressed, humiliated and enslaved by these nations, which often took their domination too far. Thus, God would exact His vengeance upon all the nations that transgressed their rightful boundary with Israel (a theme in Zechariah).

*God measures out perfect justice . . . even if not on our timetable. It took centuries for God to level the score with nations and empires that had harmed His people. No injustice ever goes unnoticed with God. **“For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).** Is there some injustice in your life that you need to commit to God's perfect justice?*

3. The Measuring Line: 2:1-13

“Jerusalem will be inhabited without walls because of the multitude of men and cattle within it. I will be a wall of fire around her, and I will be the glory in her midst” (2:4,5).

A man was seen measuring a city. The measuring line was a metaphor for either judgment *or* blessing. Here, it pictured God’s future blessing upon Israel. He will prosper them, protect them, and allow His presence to dwell among them.

God is seen moving into action to fight for His people (2:6-13). He shouts (vv.6,7), releases people from captivity (v.6), waves His hand over the enemy (v.9), dwells with His people (v.10), possesses Judah and chooses Jerusalem (v.12) and is aroused to action from His holy habitation (v.13). The nations that have touched *“the apple of God’s eye”* (Israel) will be judged!

4. Joshua Cleansed from Sin: 3:1-10

“See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes” (3:4).

Joshua the High Priest was the spiritual leader of Israel. He worked with Zerubbabel the governor in the rebuilding of the temple. Though only Joshua is seen in this vision, he represented the entire nation of Israel. Zechariah saw Satan standing before God accusing Joshua of sin (see similarly Revelation 12:9,10 where Satan is called “the accuser”). Then, he saw an advocate step forward to rebuke Satan, while defending Joshua’s value and cleansing him from sin. His filthy garments were replaced with festal robes (symbolic of righteousness).

We are all like Joshua the High Priest! We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All our righteous deeds are but filthy rags in God’s sight (Isaiah 64:6 and Jeremiah 2:22). Yet, God mercifully sent Jesus as our Savior, Advocate and Defender. He took our sins upon Himself. Once we have accepted Jesus as our sin-bearer, our Savior, we are clothed in His righteous robes. Joshua was called “a brand plucked from the fire” - a piece of wood that was useless and charred; then rescued from the flames soon enough to be made useful again. God loves us! He is our Savior! And He has a future for each of us!

The final part of this vision contained a message for Joshua the High Priest; but it concerned the *ultimate* High Priest/King who

would come from God – the Messiah (of whom Joshua was a type). The “Branch” is a term that was used to refer to the Messiah as One who would be like a branch stemming from the family tree of King David. The removal of the iniquity of the land “*in one day*” could be a reference to the day that Jesus the Messiah died on the cross. Everyone “*sitting under his vine and fig tree*” is a metaphor for the kingdom that the Messiah will someday bring to Israel.

5. The Lampstand: 4:1-14

“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit” (4:6).

All the parts of this vision worked together to picture *the power of the Spirit of God* flowing through God’s servants for the accomplishment of His work. Zerubbabel would finish the work of building the temple by means of the Spirit’s power. The 2 olive trees could represent Zerubbabel and Joshua, the two leaders of the temple-building effort. Or, they could represent Haggai and Zechariah, the voices that the Spirit of God used to spur the community forward in their work.

When God invites us to work WITH Him, He also promises to work IN us – through the supernatural power of His indwelling Spirit. We must not rely on our own strength, wisdom, abilities or resources to do God’s work. We are exhorted to invite Him to empower us to accomplish “exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to His power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). Are you asking the Holy Spirit to give you His special power for what God has called you to be and do?

6. The Flying Scroll: 5:1-4

“This is the curse that is going forth over the face of the whole land . . .” (5:3).

All the visions thus far have focused on consolation and blessing for Israel. Here we see a different message: before blessing comes scourging. God will send forth His curse (the flying scroll with judgments written on it) to purge from the land all those who commit evil. Then, in the closely connected vision that follows, the ultimate source of evil is exposed.

7. The Woman inside the Ephah: 5:5-11

“This is Wickedness!” And he threw her down into the middle of the ephah and cast the lead weight on its opening” (5:8).

Satan and his world system inspire all forms of evil. Just as Satan's kingdom is depicted as an evil woman in Revelation 18, so here a woman named "*Wickedness*" pictured Satan's evil empire. The ephah was an ancient Hebrew dry measurement equal to a bushel. The woman was sitting inside this ephah and may picture a connection between evil and commercialism (similar to Rev.18). The woman was lifted up and carried away to "*the land of Shinar*" and glorified in her own place. Shinar was used in the Bible in connection with the name "Babylon". It became a synonym for the world system operated by Satan in opposition to the kingdom of God (read Revelation 18 for a better understanding of Babylon, Satan and the woman).

8. The Four Chariots: 6:1-8

"These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world" (6:5).

The first vision depicted patrolling horses taking inventory of conditions on earth. This final vision showed horses with war chariots, emphasizing the judging work of the four spirits of heaven (probably angelic beings assigned to execute God's wrath). Each chariot was assigned to a specific region (v.8). to "*appease God's wrath*" (v.8, NASB).

9. The symbolic crowning of Joshua the High Priest: 6:9-15

While this was not a vision, it was a symbolic action carried out by Zechariah that had great prophetic significance. It was the capstone of all the previous visions concerning the future.

"Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the LORD, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices" (6:12,13).

A crown was to be made of gold and silver from offerings given by the returned exiles. Then, it was to be placed on the head of Joshua the High Priest. This was unusual, in that the crown was reserved for the King, not the Priest. The message was clear: Someday in the future, God would send the Messiah (the Branch) and He would unite the two offices of Priest and King. He would be a Priest Who offered the requisite sacrifice for the sins of mankind; but He would also be a King Who will come to rule over

mankind. Even those who are “far off” (Gentiles) will come and build the temple of the Lord in the day of His rule (6:15). (Same idea in 8:23.)

On Good Friday, Jesus became our great High Priest, offering the sacrifice of Himself for the sins of the world. On Easter Sunday He conquered Satan’s stronghold, the realm of death. On the Day of Pentecost, He ascended to heaven to take His seat at the right hand of the Father as King of kings and Lord of lords. Give thanks to God that you have a Priest-King Who has met all the requirements to bring you back into an everlasting relationship with God!

Messages about the Future: 7:1 – 14:21

Approximately 2 years after the sequence of visions, the work of rebuilding the temple was half finished. God gave to Zechariah messages that addressed both the near and long-term future of Israel and the rest of the world.

1. Fasting turned to Feasting: 7:1 – 8:23

A question arose among the returned exiles as to whether they should continue fasting on the 5th month, as they had been doing during the 70 years of captivity. God’s response is telling.

“Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for Me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?’ (7:5,6).

God saw that their fasting and weeping did not have the right motives. He reminded them of a former generation known for empty religious ceremonies (eg. Isaiah 58:3-9). And He reminded them of the prophets He raised up to call them to “true religion” (eg. Amos 5:21-24; Isaiah 1:10-17), whom they continually ignored.

Beware of “going through the motions” with God. He sees right through our external forms of religion and is looking directly into the thoughts and motives of our hearts. This is why it is so important to prepare your heart as you enter into times of fellowship with and worship of God. Notice what Jesus said about worshippers in His day: “This people honor Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me” (Matthew 15:8). Make sure your heart is drawing near to God when you come to Him!

Yet, in spite of past and present unfaithfulness on the part of His people, God promised to remain faithful to them.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God” (8:7,8).

What does the Lord want from His people in return?

“These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,” declares the LORD (8:16,17).

A section that began with a question about fasting ends with a glorious vision of a future Jerusalem where people from every nation will come to worship the one, true God!

“In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you’” (8:23).

2. Judgment upon Israel’s neighbors: 9:1-8

Zechariah has several sections detailing God’s judgment upon Israel’s neighbors. Here, close-by neighbors are singled out. The cities of Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza were all “neighbors” that had troubled Israel for many centuries. God would repay them for their harsh treatment of His people.

3. Israel’s King will come to defend His flock: 9:9-17

Zechariah jumps without warning from the near future to the distant future. He saw the Lord coming to fight for His people on a future day of battle. Surprisingly, in a passage depicting God as Israel’s mighty warrior, we find this Messianic prophecy with a gentle twist.

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey . . . He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” (9:9,11).

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey at the beginning of Holy Week, He was fulfilling this prophecy from Zechariah. He came as the ‘(royal) son of King David’, but in righteous humility. (Matthew 21:1-11).

4. He will shepherd His flock with compassion: 10:1-12

Historically, Israel had lacked the kinds of leaders (kings, priests, prophets, etc.) that shepherded God’s flock with truth, wisdom, care and diligence. This leadership failure was grievous to God because Israel was His precious flock, the jewels in the crown upon His head (9:16). Thus, God promised to judge the worthless leaders and rise up to personally shepherd His own flock.

“My anger burns against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the LORD Almighty will care for His flock, the people of Judah, and make them like a proud horse in battle” (10:3).

5. The flock doomed for the slaughter: 11:1-17

In a surprising turn, Zechariah prophesied about a future judgment that would come upon Israel because they would reject their one true Shepherd. They would value Him at the same low price of ‘30 shekels of silver’! The Mosaic Law said this low price should be paid to an owner whose slave was gored by an ox!

And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the LORD (11:13).

Thirty shekels of silver was the price paid to Judas Iscariot to hire him to hand Jesus over to the Jewish authorities. Because of the rejection of the true Shepherd, the Lord will someday allow a worthless (yet alluring) individual to arise to shepherd Israel.

“For I am going to raise up a shepherd over the land who will not care for the lost, or seek the young, or heal the injured, or feed the healthy, but will eat the meat of the choice sheep, tearing off their hooves” (11:16).

Many commentators see here a reference to the end-times Anti-Christ who will arise to rule the world. Others view this as a reference to the rulers of Rome who arose to crush Jerusalem and scatter the Jewish people in 70 A.D. after the nation had rejected Jesus as their Messiah and Shepherd.

6. The Lord's deliverance of Israel in the Last Days: 12:1-13:6

The 12th chapter opens with the nations of the earth gathering to make war against Judah and Jerusalem (this seems to refer to the end-times battle of Armageddon). The Lord will move mightily to fight for Israel and to empower her to overcome her enemies. In turn, all Israel will be moved by the Spirit to deeply repent over their rejection of their Shepherd/Messiah. The wording is striking:

“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (12:10).

Israel will recognize her rejection of the One they pierced! As they mourn over their sin, God will graciously open a fountain of cleansing for His people.

“On that day, a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity” (13:1).

God will banish all idolatry and false prophecy from the land so that along with cleansing there is ongoing purity.

Where God sees repentant hearts, He always opens a fountain of forgiveness to purify those hearts from sin and shame. Have you given your burdens to our gracious God of cleansing? He will wash away your sins, and cleanse you from your guilt and shame.

7. The Shepherd struck down, the Sheep scattered: 13:7-9

Zechariah jumps back to the theme of ch.11, where Israel was falling under the judgment of God for rejecting their true Shepherd. Here, the Shepherd is struck down resulting in the scattering of His sheep.

“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones” (13:7b).

Jesus quoted this passage to His disciples when He predicted Peter's denials and the scattering of all of them on the night of His arrest (Matthew 26:31). In the wider sense, the “scattering of the sheep” (the nation Israel) happened in the post-70 A.D. time-frame when the Jews were scattered across the Roman empire.

8. Jerusalem sacked, but the Lord arrives just in time: 14:1-21

Like ch.12, this final chapter opens with Jerusalem being attacked by the rest of the world. Just when it appears that the battle is lost, the Lord appears to fight for His people. He will appear with great power on the Mount of Olives, causing a huge earthquake.

“On that day, His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south” (14:4).

What follows is one of the grandest descriptions in all of Scripture of the arrival of the Messiah to establish His kingdom on earth.

“Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with Him. On that day, there will be neither sunlight nor cold, frosty darkness. It will be a unique day—a day known only to the LORD—with no distinction between day and night. When evening comes, there will be light. On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day, there will be one LORD, and His name the only name” (14:5-9).

At His return, the nations that are fighting against Israel will be demolished by His mighty power. There will be a literal 1,000 years where Christ the Lord will rule the earth as the Sovereign and only true King (see Revelation 20). Those from other nations who survive will come to Jerusalem annually to worship the Lord at the Feast of Tabernacles. If a nation refuses to come, God will send a drought upon their land! And in Jerusalem, the holiness of God will pervade every aspect of life, down to the smallest detail:

“On that day, ‘HOLY TO THE LORD’ will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD’s house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty . . .” (14:20,21).

Given all of his visions and messages concerning the end-times, it is no wonder that the book of Zechariah has been called the “Revelation” of the Old Testament. How fitting! “God remembers” His covenant with His people and, even though they continue to stumble and fall, He will fulfill His covenant promises all the way to the end of time!

Christ in Zechariah

The prophecies given to Zechariah concerning the future Messiah are summarized below. The verses listed in the N.T. are only a portion of where the fulfilled verses of Messiah are found.

Prophecy of Christ	Fulfillment
Servant 3:8	Mark 10:45
Branch 3:8; 6:12	Luke 1:78
King-Priest 6:13	Hebrews 6:20-7:1
Lowly King 9:9,10	Matt. 21:4,5; Jn. 12:14-16
Betrayed 11:12,13	Matthew 27:9
Hands pierced 12:10	John 19:37
Cleansing fountain 13:1	Revelation 1:5
Humanity & Deity 13:7; 6:12	John 8:40; 1:1
Smitten Shepherd 13:7-9	Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:27
Second Coming 14:5,9	Jn.10:16; Rev.11:15;21:27

(Irving L. Jensen: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi; p.45)

Discussion Questions

1. Zechariah was a trustworthy servant whom God used to be His mouthpiece. He had to say hard things to the people, yet also far-reaching prophecies that must have sounded crazy! Can God trust me to be His mouthpiece regardless of the message?
2. God brings great comfort by His reminders of past prophecies already fulfilled. I can take comfort and have peace when this world seems full of heartache, evil and chaos. He is trustworthy!
3. As a Gentile believer in Jesus Christ, I can be filled with so much gratitude as I know that I am a child of the 'Holy One', and promised a future with Him for Eternity. Who do you need to pray for/reach out to with the message of Jesus' love and forgiveness?
4. God delights in small beginnings, and causes growth for His glory and our pleasure. He also delights in those who feel they are weak, giving attention and strength to those who are humble and rely sincerely on Him. "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit" declares the Lord. How does this encourage you?
5. God has given me specific clear prophecies about the future battle against evil and the coming of Christ to reign over His Millennial Kingdom. He wants me to be encouraged that righteousness will triumph over evil, and He is just and firmly in control of the times. (These are the themes of the best films because 'something' in us knows that good will ultimately win over evil!)

GOD WITH US

Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return *Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness*

Message 16 – Keeping God First Haggai

Introduction

Haggai and Zechariah were the 2 prophets God raised up to spur the post-exilic Jewish community to rebuild the temple of Yahweh. The work on the temple had ceased for 16 years due to opposition (see Ezra 4:24-5:5). The voice of God through these prophets challenged the community to reevaluate their priorities, overcome their fears, and accomplish the work that God had called them to do. The book of Haggai contains 4 messages from the Lord over a period of just 4 months.

Message 1: PRIORITIES 1:1-15

For about 17 years the post-exilic community had been back in Jerusalem trying to rebuild their way of life. Yet, they were having great difficulty overcoming the challenges and getting ahead. God came to them through Haggai and challenged them with a critical thought: They should consider that the reason they were making little progress with their lives on many levels was that they had neglected to fulfill God's divine purpose. Cyrus king of Persia had proclaimed that the God of heaven had appointed him to send the willing Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of Yahweh (Ezra 1:1,2). The Jews began well, by constructing the altar to restart the sacrificial system again. Then they brought cedar logs from Lebanon to Jerusalem (authorized by King Cyrus) to begin the temple reconstruction work, and successfully finished the foundation (Ezra 3:7-11). Sadly, the local enemies opposed the rebuild and a later Persian king issued the work to stop (Ezra 4:21).

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house.'" Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Consider your ways! You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but

never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Consider your ways” (1:2-7).

Note that God’s words, “These people”, rather than, “My people” suggests an emotional distance; yet God’s mercy is evident again as He reaches out to call them back to His agenda. God began His rebuke through Haggai by focusing on the peoples’ procrastination, *“the time to rebuild is NOT YET.”* He pointed out that the people were living in “paneled houses,” which in that day was a sign of luxury. In contrast, God’s house remained a mere foundation with rubble all around it. It seems that the cedar that had been gathered to build God’s House had ended up being used to build their personal paneled houses! The challenge to “consider your ways” is a thematic statement in Haggai, found 3 times (1:5; 1:7; 2:18). *It means: to set your heart to, to ponder, to evaluate, take inventory.*

Maybe you’ve heard the saying: *My pocket must have holes in it because I can’t figure out where all my money is going!* God was the One Who first coined that phrase through Haggai the prophet. *“You are putting your wages in a purse with holes in it!”* Which raised the question: *Why was their financial strength evaporating?* Because they were neglecting the agenda of God for their lives and pursuing, instead, their own self-styled plans.

Malachi the prophet also challenged the post-exilic community with the notion that they were “robbing God” by not bringing their tithes and offerings to God. So they were guilty of both “taking from God” and failing to “give to God.”

So often in life we procrastinate for years, changing certain attitudes and/or behaviors that we have been asked to change, yet continue to ignore. “I don’t want to deal with that yet!” we say. Then we fail to make the connection between our spiritual lives (our connection to God and how we honor His commands) with the welfare of the rest of our lives. God was very patient with these people, waiting 16 long years before sending prophets to spell out for them their misplaced priorities. What are you procrastinating to do that is ‘NOT YET TIME’? What life-style choice does God see that you are replacing it with that you feel it ‘IS TIME’ for?

God commanded the people to go to the mountains to cut new timber to build His house. The timber given generously by Cyrus

from Lebanon was gone, yet the people seemed to not be concerned that what had been set apart for God's house was now on their own houses.

It was God Who had been causing the labors of the community to be unfruitful, due to their misplaced priorities.

“You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?” declares the LORD Almighty. “Because of My house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is runs to your own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands” (1:9-11).

The post-exilic community had “expected much” in terms of the economic rewards for their labors. But their expectations were not met because God was working against them.

Each of you “runs to his own house.” God sees the eagerness and energy that we devote to our own agendas in life. And He sees when there is a lack of zeal to pursue Him and His agenda. God desires that we love Him obey His commands first. Jesus repeatedly said this to His followers, “If anyone loves Me they will obey My commands” (Eg. John 14:23). When we do, He promises to work with us in the other areas of our lives. But when we put God low on our priority list, also failing to support His work, God withholds His blessing on our self-styled agendas. In what ways might you be “running to your own house” today, while neglecting the things of God? Another way to ask the question: What agendas has God been laying before you that you are ignoring?

To their credit, the post-exilic community heard and finally heeded the words of God through Haggai (and Zechariah). It took them just **24 days** to re-order their priorities and re-start the temple building project (note the time markers at 1:1 and 1:15).

As we know from the historical narrative in the book of Ezra, the opposition reared its ugly head once again, but this time the community pushed through, being strengthened by the ongoing voices of Haggai and Zechariah.

Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: “I am with you,” declares the LORD (1:13).

God was against them when they neglected Him; but He promised to be with them once they reprioritized Him in their lives. This is the “reciprocal principle” found in Scripture. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8; Zechariah 1:3; 7:13; Malachi 3:7). The 16 years of ignoring God was not a barrier because God longed for them to return to Him. Never use the excuse that you have been ignoring God for too long to draw back to Him. Admit your wrongs and acknowledge His forgiveness and mercy, and expect His loving embrace and support.

Message 2: PRESENCE 2:1-9

One month after they work resumed, the people were confronted again with a harsh reality: This post-exilic temple was *nothing* in comparison to Solomon’s glorious pre-exilic temple. Through Haggai, God raised the issue that He saw in people’s hearts.

“Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,” declares the LORD. “Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,” declares the LORD, “and work. For I am with you,” declares the LORD Almighty. “This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear” (2:3-5).

“Take courage” (be strong”) occurs 3 times here. “I am with you” occurs 2 times. God reminded His people that what mattered was not the physical size of the temple; rather, the *presence of God within that temple (and in their midst).*

“The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,” says the LORD Almighty. “And in this place I will grant peace,” declares the LORD Almighty (2:9).

When we are measuring our “success” we need to keep in mind God’s perspective and His purposes. The name Tabitha is unknown to even serious Bible readers. Yet, she was so highly esteemed by the early church that they asked God to raise her from the dead so they could have her longer (Acts 9:36-43). How are you measuring your success and significance today? Is it by man’s standards, or by God’s? What would God say to you if He told you what He sees in you that is “success” in His eyes?

Message 3: PURITY 2:10-19

An age-old problem began to creep in again. The people were building a temple where they could worship God; but their hearts and lives were becoming increasingly contaminated by compromise, so that the worship of God in His house would be meaningless. God raised this issue by appealing to a point in the Mosaic Law concerning the transfer of defilement.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Ask the priests what the law says: If someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?” The priests answered, “No.” Then Haggai said, “If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?” “Yes,” the priests replied, “it becomes defiled.” Then Haggai said, “So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,” declares the LORD. “Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled” (2:11-14).

The point was simple: Unclean things will make clean things unholy; but clean things will not make unclean things holy. Because the people were ‘defiled’ due to their various sinful choices, their offerings to God were therefore ‘defiled’ and not acceptable to Him. His holy temple would not magically make their offerings holy. JESUS accused the religious leaders of His day of being “white-washed tombs, full of hypocrisy and wickedness” who were dead (spiritually) on the inside, but all cleaned up on the outside. (Matt 23:27,28) Their hearts were defiled. One of the ways that the people were being contaminated by sin was through intermingling their lives with the Gentiles that lived around them (see Ezra 9:1-2; 10-12 and the phrase, “*the holy race has intermingled*”).

The apostle Paul applied this principle of the transfer of defilement with this warning: “Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good character” (1Corinthians 15:33). Sadly, the influence usually goes from those who don’t want to love and obey Christ to impact negatively those who do. The good character and morals don’t impact ‘the bad company’ as easily. In what ways are you allowing contact with “unholy things” to contaminate your heart and your relationship with God?

Message 4: POWER 2:20-23

Haggai delivered this short message on the same day as the previous one. Zerubbabel, the governor of the post-exilic community, was from the family line of King David. God gave to him a promise that would both *strengthen* Zerubbabel in his current role as Israel's leader and *confirm* the promise that a future descendant of David would come as the Messiah.

“Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I am going to shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. On that day,” declares the LORD Almighty, “I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,” declares the LORD, “and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,” declares the LORD Almighty” (2:21-23).

In ancient times, signet rings were used as symbols of authority and ownership. The emblem on the signet ring (unique to that person) was used to seal official documents with a wax imprint. This prophecy must have come as a great encouragement to the small, struggling post-exilic community, and to their governor in particular. God gave them hope for the present and promise for their future. Other nations and thrones would eventually be toppled; but the Davidic throne, as represented by Zerubbabel, would endure and succeed. Note: In Matthew 1:12 **Zerubbabel** is in the lineage of Joseph, JESUS' 'legal earthly father,' and Luke 3:27 sights **Zerubbabel** in the lineage of JESUS' 'divinely conceived earthly mother, Mary.' Israel, struggling in the post-exilic period, had a glorious God-ordained future in the world!

God is always looking toward the future potential of His people, instead of focusing on their past failures. When God looks at you, He sees the same thing – your future potential as you learn to walk in fellowship with Him. Although the picture of the “signet ring” applied specifically to the Messiah Who would come through the line of Zerubbabel (Jesus), take a moment to imagine yourself as a special, signet ring on God's right hand. Imagine God wearing a ring with your picture engraved on it. How does that make you feel? Write out and memorize these precious truths- He calls you “by name” each day as He goes before you (John 10:3). He knows you intimately (John 10:14). No one can snatch you out of the Father and the Son's hand (John 10:27-29).

Discussion Questions

1. Haggai's major emphasis was on calling people to get back on God's agenda for their lives. How has this message challenged you in your walk with God at the present time?
2. What obstacles/challenges might be causing you to procrastinate in making changes that are necessary to get back on God's agenda?
3. Can you think of a way in which God's glory might be magnified in some "small" area/work of your life?
4. Discuss ways that our purity as followers of Jesus is tested and often compromised in the current culture.

GOD WITH US
Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return
Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness

Message 17 – God's Last Word
Malachi

Introduction

Malachi was the last prophet in the Old Testament, before the 400 “silent years” leading up to the birth of Christ. Israel had been in a covenant relationship with God since the time of Moses (1440 B.C.). Sadly, for most of the 1,000 years leading up to Malachi, the people of God had failed to live in obedience to the terms of the covenant. In this final word, God once again confronted the people with their failure to obey Him. The book of Malachi has 55 verses. In 47 verses, God's broken heart cries out. The God of justice and mercy speaks firmly to His people for the last time. The name that God chose for Himself in Malachi was “Lord Almighty” or “the Lord of the hosts-armies” (used 24x), a military term. Yet, the faithfulness of God was evident in the closing lines of Malachi, as God pointed forward to the promised forerunner. His messenger John the Baptist would come in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for the Messiah.

The prophet Malachi was charged with the difficult task (as with all the prophets), of speaking God's heart and His firm truth to an erring people – both the spiritual leaders (the priests) and the people who followed them. The impact of Malachi's message comes out in the form of a running dialogue between God and His people. God presents the challenge/offense; the people challenge God with a question; and God replies with a correction or warning.

An overview of the dialogue/issues that grieved God's heart:

- 1) *“I have loved you” (1:2a). “How have You loved us?” (1:2b). “I loved Jacob, but ‘hated’ Esau” (1:2c-5).*
- 2) *“As your Father and Master, where is My honor and respect due Me? Yet you priests despise My name” (1:6 a,b). “How have we despised Your Name?” (1:6c). “You have offered defiled food upon My altar” (1:7a).*
- 3) *“You have offered defiled food upon My altar” (1:7a). Priests: “How have we defiled You, that Your altar is ‘despised’” (1:7b).*

“Do you think that a blind, sick animal is an acceptable sacrifice? Try offering it to your Governor to see if he approves. Oh that one would shut the temple doors. My NAME will be great among the nations” (1:7c-12).

4) *“You cry and complain of the burden to serve Me, and over My lack of attention and response to your offerings” (2:13). “Why do You not accept our sacrifices?” (2:14a). “You have dealt treacherously, breaking your marriage covenant with the wife of your youth, and have divorced her for a non-Jew. I hate divorce, (2:14b-17). (God pictures divorce as a husband removing the garment of covering over his wife. See Ezekiel 16:8; Ruth 3:9.)*

5) *“You have wearied the LORD with your words” (2:17a). “How have we wearied Him?” (2:17b). “By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the LORD’S eyes; or ‘Where is God’s justice?’” (2:17c).*

6) *“Ever since your forefathers, you have turned away from My decrees and not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you” (3:7a). “How shall we return?” (3:7b). “You have robbed Me” (3:8a).*

7) *“You have robbed Me” (3:8a). “How have we robbed You?” (3:8b). “You have robbed Me of My tithes and offerings. Bring the whole tithe into My house and watch Me bless you!” (3:8c-12).*

8) *“Your words have been arrogant against Me” (3:13a). “What have we spoken against You?” (3:13b). “You say, ‘It’s futile to serve God. What have we gained by following His commands? The arrogant are blessed, the wicked prosper and the evil escape His judgment’” (3:14-15).*

Israel doubts God’s love: 1:1-5

The first issue that God raised was the doubt concerning His love in the hearts of His chosen people.

“I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals” (1:2-3).

Esau and Jacob were brothers; but God chose Jacob to bring forth the line of Israel. God did not literally “hate” Esau or his descendants (the Edomites). Jesus used the term “hate” when He described to His disciples-followers, that in contrast to loving Him,

they needed to “hate” their families (Luke 14:26). The point is that God’s love for Jacob, His first-born (the Israelites), was very special (a reality that Israel had been doubting due to the hardships of the post-captivity period). The reason that the land of Edom was turned into a waste was because of their harsh treatment of Israel over many centuries, and their ongoing refusal to acknowledge the God of Israel as the One, true God (a regular theme in the words of judgment against Edom in the prophetic books). God was saying that Israel had been disciplined and restored back to their land, but proud Edom had been punished and not given back their land.

One of the most critical steps of spiritual maturity is to come to the place where we KNOW beyond a shadow of a doubt that God LOVES US. This is what the apostle John meant when he wrote: “There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear; because fear involves punishment; and the one who fears has not been perfected in love” (1John 4:18). Paul wrote: “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39). Of course, God our Father will faithfully discipline His children (Hebrews 12:10f); but even this is a sign of His love for us. Often, if we grew up in a home where love was conditional, based on our performance, it is difficult to embrace God’s unconditional love and to rest in it. Take some time to answer this question: What causes me to doubt God’s love for me?

Israel dishonors God with blemished sacrifices: 1:6-14

A requirement in the Mosaic Law stated that only *unblemished* animals could be sacrificed to God. This was important for several reasons. 1) Sacrificing one’s very best animal reminded the individual of the seriousness of the sin problem and the cost of atoning for sin. 2) Only unblemished sacrifices could depict the holiness, majesty and perfection of God Himself. 3) The animal sacrifices were pointers to the Lamb of God who would someday come into the world to once and for all take away sins. As such, they needed to be unblemished to accurately depict the sinless perfection of the Lamb of God (the Messiah, Jesus Christ). Yet, the Israelites were bringing blemished sacrificial animals to God.

“When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty (1:8).

Israel was bringing their least valuable, flawed sacrifices to God, and He was not pleased at all. Flawed sacrifices show that we do not truly LOVE GOD in the deepest part of our heart. In Revelation 3:15-16, Jesus described not fully loving Him as being “lukewarm” (hot is soothing, and cold is refreshing). Here are some ways we might bring our ‘flawed sacrifices’ (our lukewarm devotion) to God today: through token giving to God’s work when we spend huge amounts on our personal interests; through half-hearted church attendance and service- not giving some of our time and talent to serve Him and His purposes; through personal compromise or tolerance of sinful ways; through failure to apply our minds and hearts to the study of His Word personally and in community with others; through our fear of identifying ourselves as followers of Jesus, through our words and actions; through failing to “worship” during a “worship set” at church... Ask God to reveal to you the ways that you are dishonoring Him with your “sacrifices” today.

God was so dishonored by their flawed sacrifices that He wished for someone to shut the temple doors to prevent any more of this half-hearted “worship.”

“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty (1:10,11).

God desires that His name be praised in every nation. This was why He chose Israel as a “nation of priests” in the first place (Exodus 19:5,6). This is the message of the entire Bible: “From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised” (Psalm 113:3). Even at the end of the O.T. period, God vowed through Malachi that His name would be made famous among the nations, with or without Israel’s help. How might God desire to use YOU, today, to make His name famous in your sphere of influence? Another way to say it is “to put God on display”. Pray this prayer of faith: “God, I want to be used by You as a vessel through whom Your name is made famous. I want to put YOU on display for others to see and be intrigued to knowing more about You. Reveal to me what You would like to do to make this happen through me. I am willing. Reveal your light and life through me.”

God's rebuke of the Levitical priests: 2:1-9

While Israel was supposed to be a “nation of priests” representing God to the world, the tribe of Levi had been chosen from among the 12 tribes of Israel to be the priestly tribe, serving God daily at the temple. They were to not only maintain the sacrificial system; but they also were to instruct the people in the words and ways of God. Sadly, the book of Malachi reveals that the priests had failed to represent God well. This, in turn, had a negative impact on the spiritual lives of the people. Thus, God had harsh words for these spiritual leaders.

“My covenant was with him (Levi), a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth” (2:5-7).

As the above words from God indicate, there were times in Israel's history when the Levites served faithfully according to God's instructions (the book of “Leviticus” was the handbook for the priests). Certain priests from the tribe of Levi were especially faithful. Moses and his brother Aaron were descendants of Levi (Exodus 6:16-25). Their descendant Phinehas put God on display when he stood up among the Israelites and restored righteousness amidst sin (Numbers 25:1-13). Yet, sadly, throughout the history of Levi's descendants, there was a relatively small number of priests who truly loved the LORD, and served Him with all their hearts. (Even 2 of Aaron's 4 sons disobeyed the new laws as to how the priests were to conduct themselves and offer sacrifices.) Before the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's magnificent temple, the priests had long been corrupt and not leading the people in the true worship of God.

After the 70 years of captivity in Babylon and later Persia, there was new zeal and a few passionate priests who truly wanted to start it all over again, according to the way that God had initially prescribed true worship to be done.

But by the time of Malachi, the priesthood had become very corrupt. (This self-determined pattern would continue until the time of Christ

400yrs later. The Pharisees and Sadducees were very corrupt and far from leading the people toward a sincere faith, rather further away from God.)

“But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty. “So, I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law” (2:8,9).

Spiritual leadership is a weighty entrustment from the Lord. No one should ever take spiritual leadership lightly. This is why the apostle James wrote this warning: “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). Are you in a position of spiritual leadership over others? If so, walk humbly with the Lord and realize that you have been entrusted with the high calling of pointing others to the truths of God, by both your words and your walk. Make sure you are growing yourself. You can only give away what you are taking in and are sincerely trying to live out.

The problem of divorce: 2:10-17

Divorce was a major issue in the post-exilic community. But the problem was not just divorce; it was divorcing their Jewish wives whom they married in their youth for the purpose of marrying foreign women who did not hold to the same belief in Yahweh. This had been an on-going issue from the time that the Israelites came out of Egypt. Even great Kings like Solomon married many foreign wives who caused their hearts to be turned toward the gods of their wives. The men who were divorcing their Jewish wives were continuing to worship God as if everything was fine (see Nehemiah 13:23). The nation had paid a high price for many centuries by ignoring God’s command to not marry women who worshipped foreign gods. But divorcing their Jewish wives to remarry was even worse!

“Another thing you do: You flood the LORD’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. The man who hates and divorces his wife,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “does violence to the one he should protect,” says the LORD Almighty (2:13-16).

God’s heart was to build a godly nation and through them to build many nations that would raise families that loved/worshipped Him.

Jesus was asked about the issue of divorce. He clearly stated that divorce was not part of God’s original plan for marriage. He also stated that there was only one possible ground for divorce: when the husband or wife has broken the marriage covenant through adultery. And even in that case, Jesus preceded His words about divorce with a parable about “unlimited forgiveness” (see Matthew 18:21–19:12). The bottom line is that God’s will is for couples to stay together and prioritize the marriage relationship, in fulfillment of their marriage vows. If those vows have been broken, the best option is forgiveness and restoration of the marriage in a spirit of brokenness and repentance. Only in the case of unrepentant unfaithfulness (which could include betrayal and abuse) should divorce even be considered.

The forerunner to the coming Messiah: 3:1-5

Even as the post-exilic community continued to struggle being faithful to God (and His will for them), God remained faithful to His part of the deal. In chapter 3 we find a clear prophecy of a forerunner who will come and prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty (3:1).

This includes two promises: the first was fulfilled by the coming of John the Baptist (in the spirit of Elijah) as the forerunner before Jesus (see Matt. 3:1-3ff, 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27). The second sentence refers to Christ who was “The messenger of the covenant.” Christ alone could fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant, through His pure and spotless life and sacrificial death for the sins of humanity. He ushered in the New Covenant of GRACE by His blood, that He had predicted on the last night with His disciples.

The people were robbing God: 3:6-12

Tithing (giving back to God 1/10th of our earnings or produce) was the Old Testament standard for giving (see Leviticus 27:30-34). Most of the peoples' tithes were used to support the Levitical priests and their families and their duties in the temple. But the people of Israel had repeatedly failed to tithe to God. Hence, the worship system often broke down and, sometimes, came to a complete halt. (See Nehemiah 13:10,11). In this final book of the O.T., God was calling this for what it really was: robbery of Him!

“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (3:8-10).

In this challenge and promise, God was speaking in terms of a national blessing and specifically regarding the literal reversal from the lack of crops and livestock and childbirths, due to their discipline, to an abundance. In application for our times, God still challenges us to “give” and we must leave the ways that He will ‘bless’ completely up to Him, both the ‘when’ and the ‘how’.

Why does God call it “robbery” when people withhold their tithes from Him? Because everything we have is a gift from God in the first place. We are managers of God’s resources, not owners. Just because ‘we earn resources’ does NOT mean that we are entitled to claim ownership of them. Who has enabled the ability for us to work in the first place? When God asks us to give a tithe back to Him (to go toward His work in the world), He is simply asking for what is rightfully His. A ‘tithe’ is 1/10th. In the New Testament we are encouraged to give ‘as we are able’ which is inferring that we could be able to give much more than a tithe. (See 2Corinthians chs. 8,9). Further, God is inviting us to walk by faith and to trust us for His provisions going forward. How about you? Are you faithful in your giving back to the Lord? God challenged the Israelites to “test Him” in the matter of tithing to see how He would faithfully take care of their needs IF they were faithful in tithing to Him. Maybe God is calling you to take a close look at your giving to His work. Are you robbing God? If so, you are robbing yourself of the joy and the reward that God promised to faithful givers.

The scroll of remembrance: 3:13-18

Some people had been quietly “thinking” that it was a waste of time to serve God and that they would be better off if they followed in the footsteps of the godless.

“You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly, evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it’” (3:14,15).

This same sentiment (envy of the apparent prosperity of the wicked) is the subject of Psalm 73. As the psalmist pointed out, to envy the prosperity of the wicked is short-sighted, failing to give due weight to the rewards (in this life *and* the next) that God has in store for the who faithfully serve Him. We should remember Hebrews Ch. 11 where the faithful saints specifically were mentioned as examples of those who would receive their abundant blessing in eternity.

In response to the strong rebukes of God through the prophet Malachi, a group of righteous people put their names on a scroll pledging that they would seek to walk in God’s ways.

Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. “On the day when I act,” says the LORD Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not” (3:16-18).

God reminds us through Malachi that He does see each person individually. He knows who sincerely treasures their relationship with Him, and it brings Him delight. He will claim those who love Him as His treasured possession. A mature believer is one who is MORE concerned with bringing delight to the LORD, than the LORD bringing delight and blessings to him or her. Reverentially fearing the LORD and honoring His name is the greatest gift that we can daily offer to the LORD. It is a bonus to know that He will someday bless us back!

God's final call to covenant obedience: 4:1-6

God's final words in the Old Testament are fascinating. He says three things:

1. The day is coming when He will abolish wickedness and bring in everlasting righteousness on the earth (4:1-3). In that day, the righteous people will be rejoicing that they chose to walk in the ways of God.
2. Remember the Law of Moses! After 1,000 years, God was still calling the people back to covenant obedience.
3. A new "Elijah" is coming to prepare the way before the Lord. As the book of Malachi closed, the people of Israel were left waiting and wondering: *When will this Elijah-like prophet appear?*

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction" (4:5,6).

Matthew 17:11 says *"Elijah will surely come first, and restore all things."* Bible scholars have proposed that just as Moses and Elijah met Jesus on the Mt. of Olives before He entered Holy Week (when He suffered and died for our sins, raised on the 3rd day) the 2 witnesses who will give testimony before the 2nd coming of Christ will be Moses and Elijah (see Rev 11:3-12). (*Weirsbe, O.T. Prophets, Malachi, p. 488*). Irving Jensen notes in his study on Malachi (p.87), that the final word in Malachi is "CURSE". That He would send "a messenger" who will turn people's hearts back relationally, to reflect God's heart for relationship, so that He would NOT have to "curse". Christ "became a "CURSE FOR US". Christ, God's ultimate messenger of hope and redemption indeed came the first time for salvation for anyone who would believe. May we not miss this incredible time of history to believe in Him and be a faithful messenger as we have seen through Malachi and these many prophets and faithful believers throughout the Old Testament!

Discussion Questions

1. As you read Malachi, what stands out to you the most about God's final words to His people in the Old Testament? What do you learn about God's heart?

2. Much of Malachi's message has to do with giving God the honor He deserves. In what ways can you honor God more with your life today?

3. Malachi reveals many questions the people were asking about life. *"Does God really love us?" "Is it worth serving God?" "Where is God's justice in this world?" "What does God want from us?"* Do you relate to any of these questions? Or, do you have your own list of questions for/about God?