

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 28

Before we return to 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, to complete our study of the Southern Kingdom, let us consider three more of the Prophets. Amos and Hosea showed the depth of God's love for Israel. Through these Prophets, we experienced His pain when His people turned to foreign gods. We also discovered the thread of Covenant faithfulness that goes through all Scripture. In the end, despite all, mercy will triumph over judgment for those whom He will restore. Restoration follows exile for those who truly seek God.

Amos and Hosea spoke specifically to Israel, but God also uses the Prophets to speak to the entire world. His dealing with Israel and Judah is intended as teaching for all people. Through the Torah and Prophets we learn God's ways. Ultimately, through Yeshua, the fulfillment of Torah and Prophets, the Gospel message is for the entire world. Israel and Judah were selected to be instruments by which He teaches us all. There is much balancing to be done if we are to understand the width and height of God's intent through all Scripture. God is dealing with the entire world while maintaining a special purpose for the Children of Israel.

Let us, therefore, study three more Prophets. Their ministry spans more than a hundred years. They spoke not to Israel, but to the surrounding nations. They are Jonah, Nahum and Obadiah.

Day 1

Jonah was a Prophet in Israel around 750BC, at the time of Jeroboam 2nd. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. This was approximately 30 years before the exile. Jonah was sent to the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, the very nation who would soon be sent to judge Israel. Through Jonah we gain an insight of God's concern for nations other than Israel and Judah. Indeed, a great contrast is drawn. At the very same time that the Prophetic Word was being ignored in Israel, Nineveh heeded God's warnings.

Yeshua likened Himself to Jonah, comparing the prophetic sign of His death and resurrection to the time Jonah spent in the great fish (Matthew 12:38-42). Through Jonah, and Yeshua's reference to him, we learn that there is hope for people of all nations. All of us, if we heed the call to repentance, can be saved from the judgment of God that will come to the entire world.

Jonah Chapters 1 to 4. The account is short and easy to understand. It is the account of a reluctant Prophet who preferred to stay within the bounds of his own country rather than be sent to a Gentile nation. Why would God be interested in any nation other than Israel? When pressed, he preferred to go to Tarshish, the opposite way to the one that he was being sent. Yet God had a way of overcoming his reluctance because there were important lessons to be learned.

The story of Jonah contains incidents which relate to other parts of Scripture and have ongoing relevance throughout history. A ray of hope comes to all nations because of the way repentance fell upon Nineveh. At a later time, when a storm arose on the Sea of Galilee, Yeshua's disciples feared for their lives. Unlike Jonah, Yeshua had commanded that the boat go to precisely the place, on the other side of the Lake, where He was going to minister to some Gentiles (Matthew 8:23-34). Perhaps the disciples were intended to remember Jonah, and to realize how much greater than Jonah Yeshua was. The Apostle Paul also encountered a stormy sea on his way to Rome (Acts 27). Again, it is likely that Jonah's prophetic ministry to a Gentile nation would come to mind in the midst of the storm. The story of Jonah is relevant in every generation. God sends His Prophetic Word to all nations, and all who will repent will be saved. Jonah's mistake helps us to understand this. God chose Israel to be a special people, and will fulfill all His promises to them: He also calls to salvation people from all nations.

Day 2

Nahum Chapters 1 to 3. Jonah showed us that God will turn back His wrath whenever He finds repentance. Jonah gave a clear message that in 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed. It seemed an unconditional judgment because of the evil of the people of Nineveh. Jonah thought his task worthless. Assyria was a ruthless nation and not the chosen nation of Israel. Yet, God had turned away His wrath when the people of Nineveh repented. At the time of Jonah, Israel was under God's judgment because of her wicked kings. Nineveh repented while Israel remained stubborn. We must learn from these contrasting responses to God's Prophetic Word. The message is still relevant today. God has a Word for His chosen people and also a Word for every other nation.

There is an ongoing and specific promise for Israel. God gave it to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple:

If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

There is also an ongoing promise to all nations, reminding us of Jonah's ministry and Nineveh's repentance:

The instant I speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation, against whom I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. (Jeremiah 18:7-8)

Israel was intended to witness the repentance of Nineveh. It emphasized their own need to repent and the fact that, even at the last moment, God would be merciful. Likewise, all nations are intended to consider God's judgment on Israel. Furthermore, we need to consider the final result for Nineveh. Just as there was a second part to Jeremiah's prophecy to all nations, so judgment eventually came to Nineveh, who had once repented in sackcloth and ashes, but who then turned away from God once more:

And the instant I speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it does evil in my sight, and does not obey my voice, then I will relent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them. (Jeremiah 18:9-10)

Nahum prophesied to Nineveh 100 years after Jonah. By then, Israel was exiled and Judah was soon to be exiled. Repentance was not sustained in Nineveh and so judgment fell. Nahum's prophecy is as relevant today as it was 2700 years ago. It speaks of the end times, and carries warning to all nations. If Nineveh fell then so will unrepentant nations today. The imagery of Nahum's prophecy is the same as the imagery of the Book of Revelation. Study this carefully.

Day 3

Obadiah. Obadiah's Prophecy is contained in just one chapter. It brings a unique contribution to our understanding of biblical Prophecy. Though we have moved on in the history of Israel and Judah to around 500 BC, when both of the Kingdoms were in exile, now is a good time to read the Prophecy. Obadiah reminds us of the ongoing hope for the Children of Israel. Despite all, a remnant will be restored according to God's Covenant promises. Obadiah speaks of the end times when judgment will fall on the entire world and a time when God will once more restore the Kingdom to Israel.

In hindsight we know that it will not be restored as in the days of David and Solomon, but that a greater Kingdom will be planted at the return of Yeshua. Nevertheless, Zion will be restored as will the remnant of Israel and Judah. Obadiah warns us to consider these truths carefully and in balance. He spoke directly to Edom, because they were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. The dispute between these brothers resulted in Jacob's descendants taking the prominent role in God's Covenant purposes. Now, Esau's descendants witnessed judgment on all of the Twelve Tribes. They were warned not to gloat about this. God may have been administering discipline to Israel and Judah, but it was Edom's role to comfort them and not be the agents of judgment.

Edom's mistake has been repeated over and over again through history. During long and hard exile, instead of being comforted in their distress, the descendants of Israel have been persecuted over and over. Even Christians have been guilty of persecuting the Jews. By contrast, nations have been blessed who have sought to give refuge and help to the Jews. Verse 15 indicates that, in the last days, God will judge the nations according to how they treated the exiled Children of Israel. God spoke to Edom, through Obadiah, at the time of exile, so that we would all consider this Prophecy right to the days when Israel will be restored and judgment will fall on the entire earth. Obadiah, like Nahum, is a preparation for reading the Book of Revelation.

Day 4

2 Kings Chapter 18. We return to the history of Judah. When Hezekiah came to the throne of the Southern Kingdom, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was soon to be exiled. This was also when the great Prophets of Judah were commissioned by God. Isaiah's ministry spanned the period from Uzziah to Hezekiah. These chapters from Kings and Chronicles form the background for reading the Book of Isaiah. Hezekiah was a young king and became a great reformer. He witnessed the idolatry of Israel and, after six years of his reign, saw the nation fall to the Assyrians. Hezekiah responded accordingly and led Judah back to God, destroying the altars to false gods. He even destroyed the bronze serpent that Moses had made in the wilderness, because even that had become an idol.

Eight years after the fall of Israel, in the fourteenth year of his reign, a great test came upon Judah: the ruthless Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded the country. There is a piece of pottery in the Israel Museum bearing a message written at this time from those who were besieged in Lachish. It was written to King Hezekiah, who was on the point of surrender in Jerusalem. Such artifacts from the time, dug up by modern-day archaeologists, bear witness to the reality of the account we have in our Bibles. It was truly a terrible time for Judah. Yet, God provided a great Prophet and found in Hezekiah a King who trusted Him in time of need.

Chapter 19. Israel had fallen to Assyria eight years previously. Now it seemed to be Judah's turn, but unlike the kings of Israel, Hezekiah listened to the prophetic word and turned to God in repentance and prayer. Nothing is impossible for God. Hezekiah's prayers were heard and Sennacherib's army was turned back. God had a severe word for this ruthless Assyrian, who had been raised up by God, but who had not learned to obey Him. Sennacherib had misused his power and become an oppressive tyrant. Now judgment was to fall upon him. He returned to Nineveh and soon was murdered by his own sons.

Ruthless tyrants in our own day should take heed of Sennacherib's fate. Consider, for example, Germany under the Nazis. Hitler's main aim was to destroy the Jews. The entire earth became engulfed in a war as a result. Just as in Sennacherib's day, hundreds of thousands of people were killed in this conflict. The result was the destruction of Nazism and the restoration of Israel. Conflicts continue in the Middle East with new oppressive tyrants seeking to destroy the Jews. The account of Hezekiah and Sennacherib has ongoing relevance to understanding the days in which we live. God will not allow ruthless tyrants to prevail over His Covenant people.

Verses 29 to 31 speak of a new beginning for Judah. The three year cycle of land lying fallow and being gradually brought back to full production reminds us of the Sabbath year (Leviticus 25) and also the year of Jubilee. Hezekiah was in his fourteenth year as King, so that this was the end of his second cycle of seven years. These verses, therefore, were an encouragement to continuing in faith for the reestablishment of the nation after the Assyrian invasion. Provision would begin to sprout up from the harvest fields according to God's promises for the Sabbath year. This was also a sign of God's preservation of the nation. Through this sign of the harvest, God was reminding

Judah of His ongoing promises, that a remnant would be saved. Through the provision of the physical harvest they were to learn to have faith for the long-term future.

Chapter 20. Hezekiah's troubles were not over, and he listened again to the Prophet Isaiah. His life was extended because he continued to trust in God. He experienced a great miracle when the sun moved in the sky in a way that no-one can explain. It was similar to the miracle that Joshua experienced when God stopped the sun to enable him to win a battle. God would have us all remember these miracles. They are signs that God is willing and able to save His people. Difficult times still come to test our faith, and our response must be like that of Hezekiah, who listened to the Prophetic Words of God and turned to Him in prayer.

Hezekiah's life was extended, but God also warned him that the time of the Babylonian exile would eventually come upon Judah. Assyria was being replaced by Babylon as the prominent empire. For a brief moment a good king emerged in Judah, but he would be followed by evil kings. The story of Hezekiah and the Prophetic Words that God spoke through Isaiah continue to give hope for Judah, but we must remember that God never did want His people to have a king like the other nations. Hundreds of years of history proved how wrong they were, at the time of Samuel, to ask for a king. Ultimately, even though a good king sometimes reigned for a few years, the tribulation of Israel and Judah will not be complete until God puts His own Son Yeshua on the throne of David, restoring the Kingdom to Himself.

Day 5

2 Chronicles Chapters 26 to 28. Review these accounts of the Kings of Judah from Uzziah to Hezekiah. This is the background of the Prophet Isaiah.

Day 6

2 Chronicles Chapters 29 to 32. This is the parallel account of Hezekiah, containing some additional details of his reforms. Hezekiah is still remembered among the Jews as a kind of Messiah. Some Jews today long for days like this, when a righteous ruler will lead the nation back to God. The days are increasing in intensity with growing expectation for the Messiah to come and restore Israel and Judah. Even Hezekiah is not sufficient for this role. Only Yeshua can bring in the eternal Kingdom. God planted a seed of expectation at the time of Hezekiah. One day the world will be ready for Yeshua to return to fulfill the Messianic expectation to the uttermost.

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

Isaiah Chapters 1 to 6. Isaiah is hard to understand if we read his Prophecies out of context. The context is the fall of Israel to Assyria and the coming judgment on Judah, held back for a few years because of good King Hezekiah. Therefore, while the background is fresh in your mind consider the first few chapters of Isaiah. The first chapters review the condition of Judah prior to Hezekiah. God was displeased with the idolatry of both Israel and Judah. In Chapter 2, nevertheless, we have vision of the end times when God will establish the nation firmly as the prominent nation in the world, through whom He will speak to all nations. Before this, there were to be days of discipline. Isaiah foresaw the fall of the nation and the long exile, and speaks clearly about the reason why, just as Amos and Hosea had spoken to Israel prior to exile.

Chapter 6 draws a dramatic contrast between the kings of Judah and God Himself. He chose the year that King Uzziah died to draw this contrast. Judah was about to have a new king on the death of Uzziah, but what sort of king would this be? Isaiah had a vision of the Lord, high and lifted up, the One who was rejected at the time of Samuel, when Israel wanted to be like every other nation. This was the time for Isaiah to be commissioned as Prophet. The heavenly vision enabled him to understand why redemption of Israel and Judah would not be immediate. First the sins of the nation would have to be dealt with: then God would restore the Kingdom to Himself. Isaiah saw a vision of Yeshua, King of Kings.
