

Week 4: Captivity of Israel

Introduction

This week, God willing, we will shift our focus away from pre-exilic Israel and see the prophecies pronounced to the nations of the Gentiles. I'll share a map with this voice message and reference it, to help give a better idea.

We will start today with Jonah, who prophesied to the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. We are all familiar with the story of the prophet Jonah, how he did not want to prophesy to the people of Nineveh and so he disobeyed God's message to him, and got on a boat heading the other way. And here, we have a big question... why didn't Jonah want to prophesy to Nineveh, to the Assyrians?

The Assyrians were one of the enemies of Israel. They were immoral idolaters, sexually immoral, child sacrifice and infanticide. And they were brutal... it's not mentioned in Scripture, but some of the archaeological records discovered about Assyria describe their conquests - they would capture troops alive, cut off their arms and hands, cut off their noses, ears, extremities, gouge their eyes, hang them, etc. One record says "with the blood of my captives, I dyed the mountain red like red wool. I cut off their heads and built a tower with it. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls." I once heard a sermon likening Assyria to modern-day ISIS. Imagine being called by God to go and prophesy to ISIS. We might be scared - but for Jonah it wasn't so much fear, as it was he didn't want God to have mercy on them. He knows that God is merciful. He knows that if he prophesies, there's a chance God will be merciful to them. And he hates that.

And that's exactly what happens. So Nineveh repents. And now we have a dichotomy - we can juxtapose Nineveh and Israel. Nineveh is repenting, and Israel is not.

We will read in Isaiah 10 how the Lord will use Assyria to take Israel captive, despite Assyria's pride.

Then we'll read from 2 Kings 17 - The account of the captivity of Israel by Assyria.

Take a look at the map that I shared. The dark green region is Assyria before the repentance of Nineveh. The light green region is Assyria after the repentance of Nineveh and the conquests of the lands around Israel. You can see one small holdout there in yellow which is the Kingdom of Judah. Assyria will attempt to take Judah, but fail because of the prayers of Isaiah the Prophet and King Hezekiah - that will be the focus of our study next week, God willing.

Of course, Nineveh's repentance does not last forever. They eventually go back to their ways, which brings in the prophet Nahum who will prophesy against them. And this time, it won't be so nice for them.

As we know through history and through the scripture, Assyria will eventually be conquered by the Babylonians, and they will go on to take Judah captive as well.

At the end of the week, we'll read Obadiah who prophesies to another nation - Edom.

One big takeaway from these stories and prophecies is that the Lord has all of His creation in mind and in view. He is trying to bring all to repentance. Sometimes He does it by sending a prophet. Sometimes He does it by an attack on a city. Sometimes by a full blown captivity. Whether it is Israel and Judah or Assyria or Edom, they are His creation and He loves them. Even in our modern day, we may think that God does not care about the Muslims or Hindus or Atheists, but He does. And He desires to bring them all into His fold. Sometimes He may do a miracle (like St Mary Zeitoun in Egypt). Sometimes He will send them a bishop like Anba Youssef of Bolivia or Anba Boles in Africa.

But sometimes He will send them you. And it is enough that you are a light to them - that they see you live morally and you are different from the rest of their peers. And they see that you have joy and peace. That you smile at everyone whether you know them or not. That you're always willing to help. And they see that you have commitment and you're faithful in your school work, contributing hard in your group projects, well-rounded, not proud and haughty, not drinking like everyone else, not in inappropriate relationships. Then your light - the light of Christ in you - will shine on them, and the Holy Spirit will work through them to bring them to the knowledge of the Truth. The word prophet just means messenger, and in our generation, we are the messengers to the other nations.

The prophecies this week are much easier to read and to understand, and they are all very short. This can give us a chance to read some commentaries on them individually in addition to our reading of the Scripture. I hope you will read along.

Jonah 1-2

We are very familiar with the story of Jonah, and the Book of Jonah - every year we have Jonah's Fast two weeks before the start of the Great Fast. It is three-days long fast, concluding with the Feast on Thursday which is called Jonah's Passover. The rites, tunes and hymns of Jonah's Fast are identical to those of the Great Fast Weekdays. On Monday we read Jonah 1, on Tuesday Jonah 2, on Wednesday Jonah 3-4. So we read the Book of Jonah every year, we hear sermons about it, we fast the fast and maybe read the books by HHPS or something. Jonah's Fast represents for us a mini-Great Fast. Just as the Great Fast ends with the Christian Passover - the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, so Jonah's Fast ends with Jonah's Passover.

There are a few ways to look at the fast.

We fast three days as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days, and then the Passover of Jonah is when he is spit out on the land. So he was dead three days, and then was alive. And he, even, says in his prayer in Chapter 2: "Out of the belly of Hades" (or Sheol) "You heard the cry of my voice."

We also fast three days as the Ninevites fasted three days (we'll read that in Chapter 3). And then the Passover is when they are delivered by God from the sentence of death by their repentance.

So this is why some people call it Jonah's Fast and some call it the Ninevites' Fast.

The Lord Jesus Christ mentioned Jonah in the gospels. In Matthew 12, after the Lord had cast out demons, the Pharisees said "this fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons."

Sidenote, Now that we are reading the stories of the divided kingdom, we may recognize that name Baalzebub from when we read 2 Kings 1 and 2. It's the name of Baal - the false god that Jezebel and Ahab brought into Israel and worshipped.

So when the Pharisees said that, the Lord answered them that a house divided against itself cannot stand and proved to them that logically, He cannot be casting out demons by Beelzebub, but rather the Kingdom of God is upon them. And so they ask for a sign...

"But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here.'"

So in this way, we see that Jonah is a TYPE of Christ. In communion of Jonah's Fast we say "Jonah in the belly of the whale as a type of Christ in the tomb for three days." So Jonah is a TYPE of Christ, that Christ, Himself, actually referenced.

Jonah 1

In Chapter 1, we see that Jonah flees from the Lord. We mentioned the reasons for his lack of obedience in the last voice message. Jonah starts to flee to Tarshish and boards a ship going in that direction. The Lord raised up a great wind upon the sea, and the ship was in danger of breaking up. The mariners, who are Gentiles, who do not know the Lord, started to cry out to their gods. They started to throw the cargo into the sea to lighten the load. And where is Jonah in all this? Sleeping... and not just sleeping, but snoring. I'm reading here from the OSB - in NKJV it says he is fast asleep. The idea is he's in a deep sleep - completely oblivious to what he has done, and what is happening around him.

The captain finds him and wakes him up and tells him to get up and pray like the rest of them! And they cast lots to figure out who is the reason for this calamity and of course the lot falls on Jonah. So they question him and Jonah says to them "Take me up and cast me into the sea, and the sea will grow calm for you." - and still, these honorable mariners tried hard to return to land. But when they couldn't, they cried out to the Lord and said: "Please, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life, nor bring righteous blood upon us; for you O Lord, have brought this about." And

they throw him overboard and the sea stops its raging. Then they feared the Lord even more and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and vowed vows.

There are many lessons to learn from this story.

First, God used Jonah's disobedience (a bad thing) to bring about something good - the salvation of the mariners. The mariners, who are Gentiles, who do not know the Lord, on account of Jonah will believe on the Lord, pray to Him asking for His deliverance, and offer to Him a sacrifice and vow vows. And even their prayer - "Do not let us perish on account of this man's life, nor bring righteous blood upon us." - God to them at first was not God, but Jonah's God. But now, He is the One who will bring judgment, the One who hears prayers, the One who is worthy of sacrifice. The mariners are saved because of Jonah.

There is also a lesson to learn from Jonah - when they asked him "Tell us, what is your occupation? Where do you come from? What country and people are you?" - they're asking him "Who are you?" and Jonah's answer: "I am a servant of the Lord, and I worship the Lord God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." - again, I am reading from the Orthodox Study Bible. Look at this answer "I am a servant of the Lord, and I worship the Lord God of heaven." This should be our answer. Who are you? I am a servant of the Lord. Before being a Software Engineer, or for some of you a med student or a biomedical science student, or a dental student, or a dentist, or an athlete, or even a father or a husband, I am a servant of the Lord. That is my primary title, and everything else comes second. If I have to choose at work between being a servant of the Lord and getting a promotion, I will choose to be servant of the Lord. If I have to choose at school between a good grade and being a servant of the Lord, I will choose being a servant of the Lord. If I have to choose between going to an event and being servant of the Lord, I will choose being a servant of the Lord. If I have to choose between making a lot of money and being servant of the Lord, I will choose being a servant of the Lord. Every. Single. Time.

Everyone listening to this message is a servant of the Lord. I don't want you to think I'm only talking to people who have assigned services, or to the youth meeting servants. I am talking to each of you and to myself before all of you.

If I do have a specific service that I am assigned in the church - like Sunday School and Youth Ministry, deacons, cleaning, orban, kitchen, board member, visiting the sick, consolation service, sports ministry, IT and AV, Church Van, etc. There are many services in the church... this message applies doubly (x2). I am a servant of the Lord, and a servant in this specific area of service, before everything else.

Jonah 2

When Jonah is thrown overboard, the Lord commands a huge sea creature to swallow Jonah and Jonah is in the belly of the sea creature three days and three nights. And from the belly of the sea creature, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. Chapter 2 is the prayer of Jonah.

I want to encourage you to take Jonah's Prayer and to pray it - hold your bible during your prayer time and pray Jonah's prayer. There is much to meditate on in his prayer. Remember that Fasting without prayer is just a diet!

Then the Lord commanded the sea creature and it cast up Jonah onto the dry land.

Isaiah 8

The Prophet Isaiah is one of the four major prophets because he wrote one of the longest books. He is one of the great prophets who prophesied in the Southern Kingdom. He is known for his Messianic Prophecies about almost everything in the life of the Lord Jesus. To the point that sometimes Isaiah is referred to as the fifth gospel. He will be featured heavily in the chapters we read next week when we start talking about Judah. But, he did prophesy and warn about Israel's impending conquest by Assyria and he used it as a lesson for Judah to remain faithful to God.

So we'll read today from Isaiah 8.

"Moreover the Lord said to me, 'Take for yourself a large new book, and write on it with a man's pen concerning making a swift plunder of spoils, for it is near at hand.' Then make witnesses for Me of faithful men: Uriah and Zechariah, the son of Berechiah. Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me, 'Call his name Quickly Spoil, Swiftly Plunder; for before the child shall know how to call for his father and mother, one shall take the power of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria in the presence of the king of Assyria.'"

I'm reading here from the OSB, and the NKJV is a little bit different. Isaiah goes in to his wife (who is called the prophetess) and she bears a son and he's called Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. So this name means "Quickly spoil, Swiftly plunder." And I'll share with you an icon of

God uses three different methods to declare His prophetic warning to the people here with Isaiah. He uses a book or a scroll where he writes on it Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. He uses two witnesses: Uriah and Zechariah son of Berechiah. And He uses Isaiah's son who he names Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. Quickly Spoil, Swiftly Plunder.

What is the point of these methods?

- 1 - Isaiah writes the actual prophecy with pen and paper.
- 2 - Then he brings two witnesses and the point of the witnesses is to put their seal on it and witness that Isaiah wrote it BEFORE it happened. Throughout the Scripture and in the Law of Moses, something is established as fact by the mouth of two or three witnesses.
- 3 - Then this scroll or book or tablet will be put in the Temple to be seen by everyone.
- 4 - Finally, Isaiah has a son and names him the same thing and claims that this will come to pass before the boy's first year of age (before he can say baba and mama).

Now what does it mean?

Before this, Syria and Israel were joining forces against Judah. So the prophesy is that within a year, Damascus and Samaria (which are the capitals of Syria and Israel) as we read in verse 4 will be taken by Assyria - their riches and their spoils will be taken, and this will happen quickly. Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz - Quickly spoil, Swiftly plunder.

So when this happens to the Northern Kingdom within a year, and they see that Isaiah had prophesied it to come to pass, then they will ask - what else did he prophesy? Isaiah's ministry are prophesies about the Southern Kingdom because they also rejected God, although to a much lesser

degree than the Northern Kingdom at times.

For example, in verse 6: "Inasmuch as these people refused the waters of Shiloah that flow softly, and rejoice in Rezin and in Remaliah's son;" - Shiloah is an aqueduct which is dug around Jerusalem, and is a symbol of the house of David. The people have refused the God of King David, and instead rejoice in other gods. The King of Assyria and all his glory; He will go up over all his channels and go over all his banks. He will pass through Judah, He will overflow and pass over, He will reach up to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings will fill the breadth of Your land, O Immanuel." - this is a prophesy about the King of Assyria trying to overtake Judah as well. And he will come very close - even to the neck. And he will fill the land. But he won't be successful.

Isaiah here calls the land of Judah "Immanuel" - as we know, Immanuel means "God with us" and then he says in verse 10: "For God is with us."

This chapter does not have any very clear Messianic prophecies. Like if you read Isaiah 7 (the previous chapter), you find the most famous Messianic Prophecy: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

And if you read Isaiah 9 (the next chapter) you hear: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined." which is mentioned by the Apostle Matthew in his Gospel (Matthew 4:15-16) and later on in the chapter, the other very famous prophecy:

"For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this."

But this chapter, right between these two hugely important prophecies, Chapter 8 has some less clear Messianic Prophecies.

We have a reference to Immanuel ("God with us")

We have "A stone of stumbling a rock of offense" (14-15) which St Peter quotes in 1 Peter 2:8 as being the Lord Jesus Christ to those who are disobedient.

We have "I and the children whom the Lord has given me" (18) which St Paul quotes in Hebrews as referring to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Book and Prophecies of Isaiah are very rich in meaning and like all the prophets in lessons for our lives. I hope that we can spend some time and study it chapter by chapter in the future.

1 Kings 17

Yesterday we read 2 Kings 17 which is the chapter describing the captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria. It's the climax of all of the stories and prophecies we have read so far.

We started with Jeroboam who was made king over the ten tribes, and he built high places in Bethel and Dan and made two golden calves. And after him, Ahab and Jezebel brought in the worship of Baal. And after them every other king continued in their evil ways. And from the king down, the entire nation participated in the same corruption.

The chapter is pretty self-explanatory, but I want to read some verses here from verse 7-18. It sums up all of the narrative and prophets that we have read so far in these four weeks.

⁷ For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and they had feared other gods, ⁸ and had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the Lord had cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. ⁹ Also the children of Israel secretly did against the Lord their God things that *were* not right, and they built for themselves ^[a]high places in all their cities, from watchtower to fortified city. ¹⁰ They set up for themselves *sacred* pillars and wooden images^[b] on every high hill and under every green tree. ¹¹ There they burned incense on all the high places, like the nations whom the Lord had carried away before them; and they did wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger, ¹² for they served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, "You shall not do this thing."

¹³ Yet the Lord testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments *and* My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets." ¹⁴ Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the Lord their God. ¹⁵ And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and *went* after the nations who *were* all around them, *concerning* whom the Lord had charged them that they should not do like them. ¹⁶ So they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, made for themselves a molded image *and* two calves, made a wooden image and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. ¹⁷ And they caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. ¹⁸ Therefore the Lord was

very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone.

How did Assyria do captivity?

They did it in two steps. First, they take some of the Israelites out of their land into Assyria. Then they bring people to resettle the land. So if you read in verse 24: "then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities." So the idea is to take the people out of their land so that they become culturally and even ethnically Assyrian, and then resettle the land with your own people so that the land itself also becomes Assyrian.

Remember that this land is part of the Promised Land that the Lord had promised to Abraham and his descendants and given to Moses and Joshua. This is a holy land. And so when these Assyrians came and defiled the land with their gods, the Lord sent lions. So the king of Assyria sent an Israelite priest back to the land to teach them the rituals of God (aka the Law of Moses). Again, there were still some Israelites living in Samaria - they weren't all taken away to Assyria. But over many generations and hundreds of years, they started to intermarry with those Assyrians. This is all very important to understanding the relationship between Jews and Samaritans that we see in the New Testament.

Later on, after the Babylonian Captivity, the Jews will return to Jerusalem and their land and rebuild the temple and the city walls. This is in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and we discussed this at length in our Bible Study during the meeting. Those Jews would come back and find Samaritans there and the Samaritans will offer to help rebuild the Temple and claim that they are Jews who worship the God of Israel. The Jewish leaders recognize that these people have mixed religious practices and they worship other gods, and they refuse help from them. In Ezra 4:3 "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us." So the Samaritans start to oppose the project by discouraging the Jewish people, trying to delay the work by bribing Persian officials and even writing letters to the kings of Persia saying the Jews are rebellious against Persia. Some of these tactics are successful and construction is halted under King Artaxerxes. But then under King Darius, the work starts again. So the Samaritans build their own temple on Mount Gerizim.

By this time in history, the only thing that is considered to be Scripture or inspired word of God is the Law of Moses. The rest will be canonized as Scripture after the Babylonian Captivity in the time of Ezra... so these Samaritans only have the Books of Moses.

So now we come to the 1st Century and what is the political climate like between Samaritans and Jews?

1. The Jews worship in the Temple, and Samaritans worship on Mount Gerizim
2. The Jews are ethnically Jewish, descendants of Israel, and value their ethnicity, whereas the Samaritans come from an ethnically mixed race of Assyrian and Israelite.

3. The Jews believe in the Law and the Prophets (for the most part) and have additional writings like the Psalms, Daniel, etc. but the Samaritans only have the Torah (the Law of Moses) and reject any later Jewish writings.

All of this leads to hostility between Jews and Samaritans in the 1st Century and in the time of Christ. Jews and Samaritans basically just avoided each other. But the Lord Jesus Christ challenged those social norms in His ministry.

He tells the parable of the Good Samaritan who did good - better than the priest or the Levite. He heals the ten lepers, one of which is a Samaritan and the only one to come back to thank Him is the Samaritan. When Jesus and His disciples pass through a Samaritan village and they are not welcomed, James and John say "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" and the Lord turned and rebuked them. The Lord Jesus tells the disciples after His Resurrection that they will "be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And of course, the biggest example is when the Lord goes out of His way to meet the Samaritan woman at the well and bring salvation to her, whom we now know as St Photini. This will be the gospel reading this Sunday - the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman. So hopefully this will shed some light on the background to that story and those lessons.

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