

ISRAEL : STRUGGLE

sunday school module five

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. – Psalm 19:7-9

Israel: Struggle

The goal for this resource is to give an overview of the history of Israel, as a narrative of God’s people before the arrival of their Messiah. As we approach this topic, let us recall that our endeavor when studying and learning from God’s Word can never be knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but a pursuit and drawing near to our great God and Savior, who has chosen to reveal Himself to us through His Word. Our approach must always be with fear, humility, awe, wonder, thanksgiving and praise for His works, His grace, and His perfect plans. One thought while reviewing is to not disconnect yourself from the story. God has given us His Word to teach us, train us, mold us and change us. If we are one great family of brothers and sisters in Christ, then the story of Israel is OUR story, OUR history. Think Father Abraham, brother David, Sister Rahab. See how God’s revelation and works in history are not with individuals, but with a PEOPLE. As a spiritual family, we share this common experience of revelation, redemption, salvation, and struggle. Our global and eternal unity as one body of God’s people means we all share the triumphs and deep valleys together. Faithfulness (and sin) affects everyone in a family, and so it is with Israel.

As we review this body of text, I think at times we can be tempted to think that since we’re under the New Covenant, the Old Testament isn’t that important. We must remember that God

specifically chose to define the composition of this book, with its layout, volume, and content exactly as we have it today. What this means is that there is SO MUCH to learn about God and ourselves from the OT! It has been said “it’s all about Jesus”. Amen. But we must guard ourselves against a failure to recognize the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout ALL of history. We have learned many times the approach to scripture: “Who is God, What did He do, Who are we, What do we do?”. In the Old Testament we learn a tremendous amount to help answer these questions.

We will focus on learning the history of Israel, with a lens on their repeating cycle of struggle: both spiritually before God and physically as a nation and people in the ancient world. One large doctrinal theme that we must keep in mind is that God declares and defines our identity, and we act out of that identity (not the other way around). One major example of this is God’s renaming of each of the patriarchs. Israel is declared as “God’s chosen people”, “a holy nation”, and “not by their own righteousness”. We will watch God’s people again and again repeat a cycle of faithfulness, prosperity, sin, consequence, and repentance. God’s people were called to be His showpiece, his loudspeaker to the fallen and broken world. And even in Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s judgment, Israel fulfilled and communicated this message to the world: 1 – that God is a God above all others and 2 – even God’s own people would not go unpunished if they chose rebellion and refused to serve Him.

In the midst of understanding and studying Israel, we must also remember that our place before God is not one which is earned but is bestowed on us by grace through faith. God is not surprised by our unfaithfulness and sin, and we should not be either! Our confidence, and Israel’s greatness, does not lie in our own ability to perfectly meet all of God’s commands. Our confidence is in Christ, in God’s Spirit changing our lives, in the circumcision of our hearts and His changing of our hearts from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh.

Before we get down on the ground-level of our characters, below is an overarching list of the major periods of Israel.

We begin with the calling of Abraham and the patriarchs, who end up in Egypt. God rescues the people in an Exodus from Egypt. After reaching the promised land, there are periods of Judges, three kings of a united kingdom, and then a divided kingdom. The nation spends a period in exile and captivity before there is a return to the promised land.

After God's "reset" of the world with Noah, Noah's descendants begin to resettle the earth. After the dispersion following the tower of Babel, we are introduced to Abram, a man whose wife Sarai is barren, dwelling in Ur of the Chaldeans.

Genesis 12:1-4a

Abram immediately responds to God's call, journeying as God leads. Along the way, Abram cowardly allows his wife to be courted and brought into the house of other nations' leaders, due to a lack of faith in God's protection. Lot, Abram's nephew, also journeys with Abram and gets entangled in local affairs of the nations, the greatest of which is the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot narrowly escapes the city with his life, but his wife, who looks back to the cities after the specific prohibition of doing so, is turned into a pillar of salt.

God appears and reaffirms His covenant with Abram during his journeys, and is faithful to give Abram a son, despite Abram's lack of faith in God's ability to do so and even his attempt to build a lineage through his wife's servant, Hagar. Ishmael is born, but is not God's plan for His people.

Genesis 17:1-10

As Abraham continues to journey, we come upon one of God's great examples and foretastes of His great plan for a sacrifice for His people:

Genesis 22:1-3a, 7-8, 10-13a

After Abraham dies, Isaac fathers Jacob and Esau, two brothers destined for adversity. Scripture says "the two children struggled together within her". Esau famously sells his birthright and blessing as the firstborn for bread and lentil stew after exhausting himself as a "hunter and man of the field". In this way, scripture says that Esau "despised his birthright". In order to obtain this squandered birthright, Jacob (who becomes increasingly characterized by trickery and cunning) puts on goat skins to fool his aging and vision impaired father to offer his prayer of blessing reserved for the firstborn over him.

Jacob is soon sent on a journey back to Abraham's extended family, from which he is to find a bride. After Jacob reaches Abraham's family, he finds Rachel and seeks to marry her. He reaches an agreement with her father Laban to work for him 7 years to marry Rachel, but on the wedding night Jacob is presented with Laban's other daughter, Leah, instead. Jacob then works another 7 years in order to marry Rachel.

Forced to deal with a home environment of epic sister and spouse rivalry, Leah finds compassion from God as a despised and unwanted wife. God provides children to Leah first, while Rachel remains barren. In Rachel's envy and childless condition, she offers her servant to Jacob to father children for her. What follows is a frankly disturbing rate of procreation, where Jacob fathers 12 sons whose names hopefully sound at least vaguely familiar: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. It is from these sons that God grows the 12 tribes of Israel, with some minor exceptions. See the graphic below for an overview of the lineage of the 12 tribes.

Later in Jacob's journeying, he is reconciled with Esau his brother, but not without some fear and trepidation because of the things that transpired (remember that birthright and blessing?). While Jacob is alone and awaiting his brother, scripture says that "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day". After Jacob refuses to let the man go without receiving his blessing, he is told "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed".

After continued sojourning in Canaan, scripture turns to focus on Israel's son Joseph and his relationship with his brothers. Not only does Joseph snitch on his brothers, but he is his father's favorite and even receives a very nice coat to remind his brothers of the same. Joseph is given dreams from the Lord, and without warm reception, relays them to his brothers and tells them how they will someday serve and bow down to him. In retaliation and hatred, his brothers sell him into slavery. In some of the more familiar Old Testament stories, Joseph is sold as a household slave to an officer of pharaoh, where scripture tells us:

Genesis 39:3

While serving in the officer's house, Joseph is wrongly accused by his master's wife, and ends up in prison. There, the Lord was with Joseph and showed him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. Some time later, the king's cupbearer and baker end up in prison alongside Joseph, and the Lord gives them dreams which Joseph interprets for them. Joseph requests that the cupbearer would remember him when he is restored, but it takes 2 long years for the cupbearer to do so, when Pharaoh receives dreams from God. Joseph interprets the dreams for pharaoh as a prediction of 7 years of great harvest, followed by 7 years of great famine. Joseph then offers pharaoh advice on how to prepare for the 7 years of famine.

Genesis 41:37-40

During the years of famine, Joseph's distant and estranged brothers end up journeying to Egypt for food, and a familiar drama of reconciliation ensues, with Joseph graciously and with full forgiveness reassuring his brothers:

Genesis 45:5,7,8a

Joseph is reconciled with his brothers and father, and they move to Egypt to shelter and prosper under Joseph for the remainder of the famine. During the remaining years of the famine, the people of Egypt proceed to give everything they have to Joseph and pharaoh: their money, their livestock, and finally their land and themselves as slaves in order to survive. In Egypt, before Jacob's death, he blesses his sons, during which we receive a prophecy that a great ruler will arise from Judah.

At the end of Genesis, Joseph's rule has provided a place of shelter and prosperity for his family in the midst of the famine, and they have grown greatly as a people. But Exodus opens with a forbidding note:

Exodus 1:8-14

The fear of Israel grew so much with Pharaoh that he orders the execution of all male newborns. Moses is then famously hidden in a basket and found by the daughter of Pharaoh, who ironically raises him up in the palace of Pharaoh. Although Moses is surrounded by the wealth of Pharaoh's palace, he faithfully identifies himself as one of Israel, and in a flash of anger over the oppression of a Hebrew slave, he kills an Egyptian and hides him in the sand. When Moses realizes this act is not secret, he flees Egypt and settles in the land of Midian, where he finds a wife.

Exodus 3:1-10

During this exchange, Moses asks by what name he can call the god of the people, to which God provides the name "Yahweh" or "I AM WHO I AM".

Exodus 3:15

God tells Moses:

Exodus 6:6-9

What follows is the great struggle between pharaoh and the Lord. Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh and his magicians carry on an incredible display of power and stubbornness which is not only seen by Israel and Egypt but by the surrounding nations. The highlight of this struggle is the escalating ten plagues of water to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of the livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the death of the firstborn. During this time, pharaoh, Egypt and their gods are increasingly shown to be without power before the God of Israel. The final plague is an establishment of the Passover. This ongoing symbolism of a sacrificial lamb and passing over of judgment is an identifying mark of God's people. After the death of pharaoh's firstborn, he finally relents and allows Israel to be free of Egypt. Interestingly,

Exodus 13:17-18a (End at Red Sea)

God guides the people out of Egypt by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night, and shows his final judgment over pharaoh by bringing the people of Israel through the Red Sea

Exodus 14:22, 27-28, 30-31

Let us pause for a moment and be reminded of the richness of symbolism and meaning that God has built into Israel's great history. We have our great spiritual forefathers, chosen and called to a sojourning towards a promised land. A people who endure bitter slavery under the king of their world. The people receive powerful and miraculous freedom, achieved by the Passover of judgment on a sacrificial lamb. Israel has been brought out of a land of slavery but has not quite yet reached their land of perfect rest. We should be able to identify with this today.

As Moses leads the people from the Red Sea into the wilderness, immediate practical needs arise from their travels in the desert. Despite the people's grumbling and disturbingly rapid desire to return to their slavery in Egypt, God graciously transforms bitter water for the people to drink and provides daily bread for them from heaven. But freedom from slavery and daily sustenance isn't enough, and the people begin to grumble again, this time for meat. Again, God graciously provides for the people. The people are led through the wilderness to the base of Mount Sinai, where God provides a revelation of His presence by descending onto the mountain in the sight of the people.

Exodus 19:16-20

On Mt Sinai God provides the Ten Commandments, which provide a summary of how God's people are to first, relate to Him and second, relate to each other. Also at Mount Sinai an almost exhaustive system of laws, customs and social instructions are provided, instructing the people with the establishment of a legal, leadership, and economic system. After re-iteration of God's covenant with the people, God calls for contributions for the construction of a tabernacle and provides detailed instructions on how to build the tabernacle, His mobile place of worship. Included in these instructions is the ark of the covenant, table for bread, the golden lampstand, the bronze altar, and other articles of worship as well as different areas within the tabernacle and their purposes. The duties and garments of the priesthood are also outlined. While Moses is up on the mountain receiving this instruction from God, the Israelites lose their patience:

Exodus 32:1-6

When the Lord informs Moses of the people's idolatry and His desire to destroy the people for their sin, Moses intercedes on the people's behalf and for God's own reputation, which may have been misunderstood by the surrounding nations to represent evil intent of the Lord by bringing them out of Egypt to destroy them in the wilderness. After the Lord relents of the disaster He had spoken of, Moses descends from the mountain to the people in the midst of their post-feasting revelry. In his anger, Moses throws down and breaks the tablets, burns the calf in the fire, grinds it into powder, scatters it on the waters and makes the people drink it. Moses again intercedes on the people's behalf, this time asking God to forgive their sin or to blot his name out of God's book.

Exodus 32:33-35

When God commands the people to leave Mt Sinai, he declares that He will not go among them, because He would consume them due to their stubbornness.

Exodus 33:4-5

Scripture tells us that God "spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend". After God's declaration that He would not go with the people, Moses pleads to God:

Exodus 33:16b

We, as God's people, must consider His presence our greatest treasure! We must disdain a "promised land" of prosperity, ease, and comfort if it is devoid of our Lord!

After pleading for the people, Moses then journeys back up the mountain, both to receive a second copy of the tablets and to receive a unique revelation from God, in which God reveals His Name.

Exodus 34:6-7

After Moses returns from the mountain a second time, the people begin construction on the tabernacle, and Moses dresses and anoints Aaron and the Levites as a perpetual priesthood for the people. Upon completion of the tabernacle, the courts, and articles of worship according to God's instructions, God gives Israel again another visible sign of His presence and glory among them:

Exodus 40:34-35

After God's revelation to the people of His presence in the cloud and the tabernacle, God provides Moses with detailed instructions for the priests, for offerings, festivals, tithes, cleanliness, economic and social law and many other details of the peoples' lives. Since the instructions for the people for their daily lives were to be executed by the Levites, these instructions are contained in the book called Leviticus. Much can be learned about God from the ethics and practices in this book. After the Levites begin their ceremonial duties, which have very detailed instructions and prohibitions, we reach the story of Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron who take it upon themselves to offer a fire to the Lord which is not according to God's instructions.

Leviticus 10:1-2

Nadab and Abihu serve as an example to the people (and to us!) that God should only be served and worshipped on His terms, that we must take His instructions and Word as without need for correction or change. We are to take no liberties with what He has taught us.

The laws and instructions of Leviticus also remind of God's holiness, and how we as God's people are set apart and should not desire to live as other people do. In a common refrain, God warns the Israelites:

Leviticus 20:26

After receiving instructions for the Levites, the Israelites begin their journey from Mt Sinai to the promised land, following the Shekinah cloud of glory which was the symbol of His presence.

During their travels, Israel shows their weakness of dedication and faith to God in their consistent grumbling and complaining about conditions. The Israelites go so far as to long for their previous slavery in Egypt, seemingly forgetting the bitter conditions they endured. During their craving for meat instead of the simple manna, God tells Moses to relay to the people:

Numbers 11:18-20

God proceeds to provide an incredible volume of quail for the people who number greater than 600,000, but

Numbers 11:33

The name of that place was called Kibroth Hattaavah, or “graves of craving”, with haunting symbolism of the seriousness of the sin of ingratitude and discontentment in what God provides.

God then instructs Moses to send one man from each of the tribes to spy out the land of Canaan. The spies bring a report of a rich land “flowing with milk and honey”. But they also bring a report of fear and a lack of faith in God’s power. Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb, call the people to trust in God:

Numbers 13:32 – 14:12

Moses intercedes for the people, but their treachery and lack of faith is so great that God tells Moses:

Numbers 14:28-30

And so begins the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, where the generation who rejected God are forbidden to enter the promised land. During this time, we witness the peoples’ fickle faith in God, with repeating episodes of grumbling, rebellion against leadership, and even worship of other gods. During one episode of grumbling, Moses disobeys God’s instructions on how to provide water for the people and strikes the rock at Meribah, and his failure to uphold God’s holiness in the sight of the people leads to God forbidding Moses to enter the Promised Land.

At the end of Numbers, we find the people after 40 years of wandering, at the border of the promised land. Deuteronomy, the last of the scriptures traditionally attributed to Moses as author, outlines Moses’ final address to the nation before his death. Moses revisits Israel’s story

and reminds them of their treachery and God's mercy and faithfulness. Moses instructs the people:

Deuteronomy 10:12-21

After Moses appoints Joshua as his successor, Moses ominously tells the people:

Deuteronomy 31:27,29

After Moses' death, God affirms and encourages Joshua as leader of the people. When spies are sent out to investigate an immediate city in the region, we meet Rahab, a prostitute of Jericho who recognizes God's presence with His people and tells the spies:

Joshua 2:9-11

At long last, the Israelites finally enter the promised land, taking a familiar path through the Jordan River by walking through waters on dry land.

Joshua 5:1

Israel's first conquest of the great fortress of Jericho was another sign of God's great power and presence with His people. After this great victory, we do not get far into the conquest and driving out of the pagan nations before Israel begins to stumble. Despite the obedience of the rest of the nation, a single individual's taking of items which were devoted to destruction led to loss in battle. God's anger could not be averted until the sin in their midst was dealt with, and Achan and his family are stoned for their sin. After this, God's favor is restored to the people in battle. As Israel continues in conquest of the land, we are reminded of God's dual purpose of blessing His people with a great land but also using them as His instrument of judgment:

Joshua 11:19-20

After an incredible and miraculous military campaign in the promised land:

Joshua 21:44-45

In order to settle the recently gained land, an allotment to each of the tribes is outlined. Reminiscent of Moses' farewell address, Joshua gathers the peoples of Israel for a farewell address prior to his death, in which he recalls God's great mercy, works, and covenant faithfulness to His people. Joshua reminds the people of the nature of their inheritance:

Joshua 24:13-15

The book of Joshua concludes with a beautiful testament to Joshua's leadership and faithfulness of the people:

Joshua 24:31

After the passing of this generation of leaders, we see Israel sin in a failure to fully drive out the remnants of nations in their land. Scripture tells us in a pointed repetitive manner that the tribes did not drive out the other nations despite the people's call to do so. God then declares to Israel that the nations they did not drive out would become thorns in their sides and their gods would be a snare to them.

Scripture tells us:

Judges 2:10b-15

At this point we enter the portion of judges in Israel's history:

Judges 2:16-21

And so with the end of the conquest and what should have been great rest for the people of Israel and enjoyment of God's presence, we see a repeating cycle of God's direct appointment of judgment from other nations for disobedience, and a raising up of leaders for the people's deliverance from oppression after the people cry out to the Lord.

Some of the judges who are raised up for deliverance during this period are Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. This portion of history includes Gideon's requests for signs of God's favor in battle with alternating wet and dry fleece and grass in the morning, and of course Samson's great strength against the Philistines and weakness to resist the woman Delilah.

Tragically, the book of Judges concludes with an episode which expresses the depth of wickedness and sin that the people had tolerated within their boundaries, in which a woman perishes from abuses at the hands of the men of a city in the Benjamite territory. After sending a disturbing message to gather all the tribes of Israel:

Judges 20:12-13

So dark is Benjamin's unfaithfulness to God that they gather to defend those in their territory who committed the "abomination and outrage". What ensues is a "civil war" within the tribes of Israel, where the 11 tribes suffer two defeats in battle before God gives them victory. At the end

of the fighting, 65,000 Israelites have died and the tribe of Benjamin is so close to complete destruction that only 600 men escape by fleeing into the wilderness. Judges sadly ends with:

Judges 21:25

After the death of Samson, the last judge of Israel, we are introduced to Hannah: a childless woman who prays to the Lord that if He would grant a child, the child would be dedicated to the Lord. So dark is the spiritual state of Israel at that time that Eli, the priest at the temple, assumed that rather than praying, she was drunk. We continue to learn that Eli's sons, who were "worthless men who did not know the Lord", were sinful and manipulative servants at the temple. Unfortunately, Eli was remiss in addressing the problem with his sons. Meanwhile, the Lord grants Hannah her request for a son, and she gives birth to Samuel. As a young man dedicated to the Lord and serving in the temple with Eli, Samuel receives a vision from God declaring to Eli that his house will be cut off from serving at the house of the Lord. At this time Samuel grew into a prophet for all Israel.

As Israel continued to war with neighboring and displaced nations, the elders of the people make an attempt to guarantee victory in battle after a defeat by the Philistines. Instead of looking to God, Israel carries out the ark of the covenant in battle, treating the ark as the powerful object itself, rather than the God whose presence it represented. As God will not be manipulated and His hand will not be forced, the Israelites are defeated and the ark is captured by the Philistines. When the ark is brought into Philistine lands and placed in one of their temples, the statues of their false gods are found broken and prostrate before the ark. In one pagan city and then another where the ark is stored, disease and tumors break out against the inhabitants. The third and final city where the ark is brought is thrown into a "deathly panic", with the inhabitants insisting it cannot enter. Through the plagues in Egypt, Israel's conquest, and the Philistines' experience with the ark, God has made sure that the nations have seen and experienced his fearsome presence.

After the ark is returned to Israel, the great prophet Samuel receives a terrible message from the leaders of Israel:

1 Samuel 8:4-22

Israel has rejected God as their King! In our identification and parallel journey of faith with Israel, we cannot miss their (and our) desire to "conform to the patterns of this world".

After Israel's rejection of God, Samuel is instructed to find the first king of Israel: Saul of Kish. Scripture tells us of Saul's transformation that "God gave him another heart". In one of the many telling sayings of Saul, the people are so surprised to see Saul's Godly change that they say "What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?"

Saul is confirmed as king over the people by Samuel the prophet and by military victories for Israel. As Saul continues in military exploits, he finds himself in a weakened state prior to battle. In an impatient and presumptuous move, Saul performs a sacrifice strictly reserved for the priests. In this, Saul shows a lack of the fear of God.

1 Samuel 13:13-14

As Saul continues in a downward spiral from God,

1 Samuel 15:10-11a

After another disobedient act of Saul regarding offerings, we find a telling scripture for us in our daily lives and pursuit of obedience, as well as a warning against considering our sins as small:

1 Samuel 15:22-23

Samuel is shortly instructed to anoint Saul's successor as king in a familiar story. Samuel is warned when he incorrectly assumes the eldest son of Jesse is to be appointed:

1 Samuel 16:7,10-13

Although David has been anointed as king, Saul still retains the throne. In David's first major public appearance, he confronts Goliath on the field of battle. David declares:

1 Samuel 17:45

As we know, God provides victory for David and Israel.

1 Samuel 18:14-15

In the midst of Saul's decline, while David is in his service, he even makes attempts on David's life. David goes so far as to flee Israel for a time, all the while bringing more and more people into his influence and military service. David shows incredible humility and fear before the Lord, sparing Saul's life on multiple occasions while being hunted by him, because he refused to raise his hand against the Lord's anointed.

After Saul's death in battle, there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David. David was anointed as King in the southern tribe of Judah, while Saul's son Ish-bosheth was made King over the remaining northern tribes. After the downfall of Ish-Bosheth, David is anointed as King over the re-unified tribes of Israel.

2 Samuel 5:10

Soon after David's full appointment, he conquers and makes his dwelling in the Jebusite city of Jerusalem, which David builds up into a fortress and capital of the nation. During this time, God proclaims to David that one of his descendants will rule an everlasting kingdom. While bringing the ark of the covenant into the nation's capital, David provides an example of what we might aspire to while celebrating God:

2 Samuel 6:14a

When confronted and mocked by his wife on his worship style, he famously responds:

2 Samuel 6:22a

What a challenge and example to us in our worship!

Until now, God's dwelling place in Israel was still represented by the tabernacle, the mobile tent which was constructed in the wilderness. After God provides rest for the promised land and Israel's enemies are dispersed by king David, he begins preparations for the building of a permanent house of God, the Temple. God declares that David's hands have shed too much blood for the building of His house, but that his son will do so.

As we should be steadfast in noticing in scripture, none of the "heroes" are without their flaws, and David is no exception. During the time when kings typically are off at war, David remains at home in his palace, and sleeps with one of his soldier's wives. Not only does he commit this treachery, but after unsuccessfully attempting to make it seem like the woman's baby is not from this adulterous act, David resorts to intentionally having the man killed in battle. Although God forgives David, there are significant consequences:

2 Samuel 12:10

After the loss of David and Bathsheba's firstborn as a result of David's sin, Solomon is born, who is to be David's heir to the throne. But due to David's sin, great grief and brokenness dwells

in his family, including rape, murder and betrayal, and David is even chased out of Jerusalem into hiding by militant pressure from his own son.

Again, after David's death, a power struggle ensues before rule is gathered together under Solomon. Solomon's great wealth, wisdom and splendor as a ruler will likely never be matched. Solomon is blessed because, when God tells Solomon "Ask what I shall give you", Solomon humbly responds by calling himself a little child, and asking:

1 Kings 3:9-13

The things we long for! The things we truly want! That should be our prayer: for faithfulness and ability to govern and serve in whatever sphere God calls us to. Solomon is visited and praised by rulers and peoples from the four corners of the earth, and those people rightly recognize that God is truly good and great, by placing such a king in place over His people.

The temple of God's dwelling is completed under Solomon, and is dedicated with great ceremony and celebration. God tells of His disposition to His people and temple:

1 Kings 9:3

According to God's good covenant with the people, His favor and blessing would have always remained, but we can't be so optimistic. Israel's penchant for sin is as deep as our own. Despite Solomon's incredible wisdom, he breaks from faithfulness to God, including the formation of a vast harem of women and many political marriage alliances. In Solomon's later days, he falls prey to the temptation to serve the gods of his many wives.

1 Kings 11:3-6

In God's judgment, he declares that he will tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon. Shortly after Solomon's death, the kingdom is divided again in power struggle, but will never be united under a Hebrew king again. Two southern tribes, collectively known as Judah, were loyal to Solomon's son Rehoboam, while the remainder of Israel abandoned all ties to David and subjected themselves to the military captain Jeroboam. Interestingly, just as the two leaders are ready to meet in battle, God tells them to cease in warfare, that the division of the kingdom is directly from Him.

From this point on, there are two kingdoms within the Promised Land: Israel in the North with Samaria as its capital and Judah in the South with Jerusalem as its capital, significantly with the

temple of God. Both nations' faithfulness to God are abysmal, with God-fearing kings as the exception and the nations descending further into sin and rebellion and looking each generation more like the nations which were driven out for their sins. In a foreboding preview of spiritual apostasy, Jereboam the first king of Israel began his reign by setting up two golden calves in the kingdom and declaring with familiar irony:

1 Kings 12:28

The successive kings of Israel and Judah quickly devolve into an epic saga of betrayal, military overthrow, family feuds, and civil unrest. The chart below shows the kings of Israel and Judah through their history. If you look at the "start/end" spiritual generalization of each king's rule, you'll notice an alarming majority of "evil" kings, especially as you look at the kings of Israel. Typical language of scripture to describe such a king's reign and spiritual legacy are:

1 Kings 15:33-34

This period is not without its stellar examples of faith and grandiose displays of God's power. Elijah, a prophet in Israel, warned of God's judgment before Ahab the king:

1 Kings 18:17-19,21

During this gathering, the false prophets of Baal are mocked and derided in their spirited but futile attempts to call for their mute and powerless god to respond.

1 Kings 18:29

God then responds to Elijah's prayer:

1 Kings 18:37-40

The chronicles of Old Testament Israel are full of incredible, rich examples of faith and zeal for the Lord. From our last chart, you may have noticed only a single instance of "good"ness in the kingdom of Israel. After Ahab is declared as the peak of wickedness in Israel, along with his more famous wife Jezebel, Jehu is anointed by the prophet Elisha as king and challenges Ahab's wicked sons Joram and Ahaziah. In great passion for God, while challenging these leaders who followed in their father's wickedness, Jehu rides out against these kings:

2 Kings 9:20b-24, 27, 30-37

In a subsequent episode of dramatic judgment, Jehu cunningly gathers all of the prophets of Baal into their temple of worship, telling them “I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal”. Jehu then orders their full execution, drags out and destroys the articles of false worship and turns the former temple into a latrine. Despite Jehu’s zeal for the Lord, God’s judgment remained on the house of Israel:

2 Kings 10:32a

Along with the decline of Israel’s spiritual state, their independence and national strength waned as well. As God’s hand of blessing is lifted from the people and His hand of judgment descends, the surrounding nations increasingly dominate and oppress the people. In 722 BC, the king of Assyria captured the Israel capital of Samaria and carried many of the Israelites away in captivity.

2 Kings 17:7-8, 13-20

Although there were some faithful kings in the southern kingdom of Judah, their rebellion against God led to their judgment as well, and 135 years later in 587 BC Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, the Temple was destroyed and Judah was carried captive to Babylon. Second Chronicles summarizes the character of the people and their judgment and exile:

2 Chron 36:15-21

The prophet Jeremiah was called as God’s voice to the people during the period preceding and after Judah’s exile. Jeremiah is sometimes called the Weeping Prophet, for his emotionally charged accounts of the sin and judgment on God’s people. Fittingly, Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations, which is dedicated to mourning the fall of Jerusalem. Many of the prophets of Israel were given symbolic gestures to display God’s message to the people. Jeremiah is told by God to purchase a garment, hide it in some rocks, and retrieve it at a later time. God declares that, just as the garment which was weathered and worn, Israel had become “good for nothing”. The people were intended to be intimately bound up with God and sharing in His joy and shalom, but they had abandoned God’s call.

While the people are living in exile in Babylon, they receive this familiar instruction from the prophet Jeremiah, which we can identify with ourselves as aliens and as a people who have not yet reached the promised land:

Jeremiah 29:4-7

The prophet Jeremiah also prophesies of a new covenant to come, one where God's law would be written onto the people's hearts.

30 years after the fall of Jerusalem, Cyrus of Persia overthrows Babylon, and receives a word from God to allow them to return to their land and rebuild their temple. The book of Ezra recounts the proclamation of Cyrus for God's people to return. Beginning with rebuilding the altar and making offerings before God, the people move forward with rebuilding of the temple. Ezra recounts the tragic celebration of the completion of the rebuilt foundations:

Ezra 3:11-13

Ezra continues to recount the completion of the rebuilt temple, the reestablishment of the priesthood, and an accounting of the people returned from exile. Against political and physical opposition, the people are successful in their rebuilding.

The book of Nehemiah overlaps the later ministry of Ezra, recounting the story of an Israelite who was an official of the Persian empire. Nehemiah receives word of the state of Jerusalem and is allowed reprieve in his duties to investigate the state of the city. After cataloguing the state of the walls and gates of the city, Nehemiah receives God's incredible favor through the Persian rulers not just by allowing him to rebuild the walls of the city, but in the complete funding of the project from the revenue of some local leaders who had opposed the rebuilding. Nehemiah shows great examples of steadfastness, courage, and determination in the midst of opposition to God's work.

Nehemiah includes a beautiful recounting of the building of the city walls, where a long list of people who take part in the work are provided. The work was done at threat to their lives, on their personal time, and only possible by the sheer unity and number of workers. The city wall was completed in an incredible 52 days, a testament to the people and Nehemiah's vigor in the work.

Unsurprisingly, Ezra and Nehemiah have to address sins of the people in the midst of this time, including intermarriage with the other nations during exile and economic oppression of fellow Hebrews. After a reading of the Law of God and expressed repentance from the people for their sins during a celebration of the completion of the wall of the city, the people are encouraged by their leaders:

Nehemiah 8:9-10

Interestingly, there is a period of silence in scriptural prophecy and writings for over 400 years before Christ. During this time, the people of Israel wait, hope and pray in eager anticipation of the coming Messiah and kingdom that God foretold through His prophets. The kingdoms who rule over the Jews during this time include the Persians, the Greeks, Syria and Egypt, a partial autonomy under the Maccabees, and finally the Romans from 63 BC until the coming of Christ. During the 400 years, Israel never enjoys complete independence. We recognize the symptoms of the desire for independence and a national identity in many behaviors of Jesus' followers.

Obviously not all of the Old Testament can be reviewed in such a brief time. My hope is that we have provided a somewhat coherent overview, which via repetition and study can help each of us in our understanding of God's Word, His work, and His purposes in history. Romans speaks of Christ coming "at just the right time", and I think that if we understand the journey, the longing, and the struggles of Israel we too will share in a deep yearning for a perfect king, kingdom and Messiah. So much of the New Testament is not fully understood without the background, parallel, and fulfillment of the Old Testament. Don't neglect it! We know that Christ did not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

Finally, let us find hope in God's incredible patience, faithfulness and plans for His people. As we have discussed, Israel is not a picture perfect story of God's faithful people, but rather the roller coaster and struggle of a people who are called by God to be His own. Israel is not the hero, Israel does not receive the praise. In our own lives, we must recognize the same. We must ask God to reveal the true nature of our hearts, just as full of sin, deceit and rebellion. We must ask God for a new heart, a soft heart which humbly submits to our good Father. Praise God for His work! Praise God for His plans! Let us always seek God, fully submitting to Him and offering ourselves in desperate understanding of our need for His rule and reign in our lives. As we seek God, let us recall one of His good promises to the people of Israel after the dedication of the first temple – may this be true of us!

"if my people, who are called by my Name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

-2 Chronicles 7:14

The Law:

The center of God's relationship with Israel.

One of the most critical and yet misunderstood parts of the Bible is the Law. The Law constitutes most of the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy as well as parts of Exodus. It was the core of life in Israel because it spoke to and governed nearly every aspect of their human experience. The Law cast God's vision for Israel's worship, legal structure and ethics, and through it, he set them apart from their neighbors. Though the Law technically begins in Exodus 20 with the Ten Commandments, God had already established a relationship with mankind that had a law at its center.

The first two chapters of Genesis recount the creation of our universe, climaxing with the creation of mankind. Shortly after being created, God gives Adam and Eve an instruction. They can eat from any tree in the garden except the one that stood in the middle. Creation began with only one law, don't eat from this one tree. Adam and Eve were free to explore and cultivate every other part of creation but had to refrain from eating the fruit of the tree. No one since has experienced such freedom and yet, it was not enough for them. They were tempted to eat the fruit and they did, throwing all of creation into sin and chaos.

From the beginning, Law was the foundation of mankind's relationship with God. In fact, law is the foundation of every relationship. In many ways, relationships are simply agreements about how people are going to act towards each other. A marriage is basically an agreement to choose to love, honor and cherish 'till death do us part. Of course, this sounds very sterile and clinical but the way we choose to interact with each other defines the type of relationship we have. I am "legally" bound to act in ways towards my wife that would violate another relationship and vice versa. The Law, then, is simply the way that God the creator has made mankind to live with one another and with him. This is significant because we have the tendency to feel like the law is a random group of rules meant to ruin our fun, when in fact it is the definition of what it means to be human, given to us by our creator.

This covenantal nature of the law is probably the most foreign aspect for modern westerners. For most of us, the idea of law has a purely penal connotation to it and this is not absent from the OT but is only part of the picture. The Law is covenantal before it is penal. This means that the Law stands as a seal of our covenantal relationship with God. Jeremiah 7:23 sums up the relationship this way, "But this command I gave them: 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.'" Humanity's relationship to God is inextricably related to its faithfulness to God's law. It is impossible to live as God's people and not obey his law because the law is a reflection of God's purpose in creation, which was to make us in his own image! Thankfully, our disobedience to God's law, while detrimental to us, never separates us from our covenantal relationship to God, because he has promised to eternally hold up his end of the covenant.

Human flourishing in a broken world.

It is critical to understand that the Law was never meant to be an ethical vision divorced from our creation. It is not as if God created human beings and then, hundreds of years later, wrote a law to govern their behavior. The Law is a reflection of God's intention for humanity. From the beginning, God created us with limitations. Any time something is created for a purpose, it creates the opportunity for that thing to be misused. The Law is, first and foremost a positive vision for human flourishing. Before sin, the law as we know it now, wasn't necessary. Adam and Eve were in perfect relationship with God and each other so they didn't need the guardrails of the law. Once sin entered the world, temptation and confusion came with it and thus the need for the law to govern our lives.

While the Law is God's vision for human flourishing, it carries with it the realization that we live in a fallen world. The Law, therefore, isn't a pie in the sky vision of a divine utopia, but a clear-eyed and realistic expectation of God's people living in a fallen world. Without sin, there would be no need to lay out legal consequences for wrongdoing, but since sin is our reality, the Law includes real-life consequences. Without sin, there would be no need for the sacrificial system that the Law takes such great pains to describe, but since we regularly fall short, we are in need of a way to atone for our sin, which the law provides.

An example of this is found in Jesus' words in Matthew 19. Jesus is responding to a question posed to him by the Pharisees about why Moses allowed divorce and says, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." God gave Israel a law to govern them that didn't reflect his will perfectly, but did so practically, in light of their spiritual condition. This is really remarkable because it reflects a God that genuinely loves his people and shepherds them from where they are, instead of just sending disconnected decrees.

Is the Law still relevant?

One of the reasons that the Law can be hard for us to understand is that it encompasses three separate categories of law, some of which are relevant for us today and some that are not. Untangling these three categories can help us to understand the Law more fully and benefit from it.

The first category of laws are the ceremonial laws. The ceremonial laws guided the Israelites worship practices, especially concerning purity and atonement. The Law said that the Jews could only approach God in worship if they abided by dietary, clothing and behavioral norms. This flows out of a rich theology of human sin and the holiness of God. Much of the OT Law speaks to these issues, so are they still relevant for Christians today? The simple answer is "no" but it's really important for us to understand why. Throughout the OT, writers hinted at the fact that the ceremonial laws weren't ever intended to be eternal but pointed forward to a greater reality. We know now that this reality was the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, he satisfied, once and for all, the need for atonement for sin. No longer do Christians need to make animal sacrifices or avoid touches certain fabrics or people because Jesus has made us righteous by his blood. The writer of Hebrews makes this point clear by saying in 10:14, "by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Therefore, in Christ we have been made holy and are able to enter into the presence of God boldly.

The second category of laws are the civil laws. In the OT, Israel was a nation-state that governed itself as such. They existed at times as a theocracy, and therefore their moral laws also carried with them civil penalties. This is no longer our reality, as the church is now not a single political entity but a multi-racial and multi-national “invisible” church spread out over the whole globe. Because of this, the civil penalties outlined in the OT are no longer relevant for Christians today.

Lastly, the moral law. Both Paul and Jesus make it clear that Christians are still bound by the moral law of the OT. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it” and proceeds to demonstrate how the language of the law primarily dealt with external manifestations of sin but that God was most concerned about the internal roots of sin. Paul, in Romans 13:7-10 reiterates the importance of the moral law for the Christian and implores the church to fulfill it. Within this category there is a range of interpretation. Some scholars argue that only those moral laws reiterated in the NT are still relevant for Christians, while others argue that unless an OT law is specifically refuted in the NT, the law stands. The truth is that there are very few laws that are caught in this tension, so it is safe to assume that the OT moral law is still relevant for Christians today.

The Covenants

The Bible uses the word covenant to describe the unique relationship that God has with his people. Wayne Grudem, in his Systematic Theology, describes a covenant this way, “A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship.” This academic definition might obscure the real beauty of the arrangement. Covenants are not just contracts, in fact they are much more than that, they are the foundations of relationship. God chose to use covenant as the mediator of our relationship to him, when he did not have to. God could have simply given the Law to his people and sat back to assess our ability to fulfill the Law. Entering into covenant with humanity puts God “on the hook” so to speak for the fulfillment of the covenant. The only way that the covenant(s) will endure is if God eternally and unconditionally holds up his end, and he does.

The Covenant of Works

The first covenant that we see in the Bible is the “Covenant of Works” (or Adamic Covenant, Covenant of Nature) between God and Adam and Eve. There is some disagreement about whether or not this constitutes a true covenant and while the word is not used, all of the necessary elements are in the story. Dr. Grudem explains it this way, “the essential parts of the covenant are all there – a clear definition of the parties involved, a legally binding set of provisions that stipulates the conditions of their relationship, the promise of blessings for obedience, and the condition for obtaining those blessings.” God also makes clear what the punishment for breaking the covenant would be in Genesis 2:16-17, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

In a sense, the Covenant of Works is still in effect. Paul teaches that perfect obedience to the Law would result in life (Rom. 7:10, 10:5, Gal. 3:12) and the punishment for breaking the covenant remains in place, death itself (Rom. 6:23). In another, more important sense, the Covenant of Works has been superseded by another, greater covenant, the Covenant of Grace.

The Covenant of Grace

Adam and Eve’s failure to uphold their end of the Covenant of Works could have been the end of mankind’s relationship with God. In their moment of rebellion, God could have killed them and simply moved on, but he didn’t. After their failure, he instituted a new covenant, a Covenant of Grace. The Covenant of Grace takes many forms through the story of the Bible but the essential character of it has remained the same. Similar to the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace is an agreement between two parties (God and his People), has stipulations for participation (Faith in God’s redeeming work), promises of blessing (eternal life), an outward sign of the covenant (circumcision in the OT, Baptism in the NT) and consequences of a broken covenant (eternal death). The key difference between the covenants is the fact that the covenant of Grace has a mediator, Jesus Christ.

The good news of the Gospel is that in spite of the fact that we have and continue to fall short of the Covenant of Works that God entered into with us, he has made a New Covenant in which he fulfills the responsibilities of both parties! God holds up his end of the covenant by remaining eternally faithful to us and Christ, our mediator, stands as the righteous fulfillment of the covenant as our representative. Our role in the covenant is to place our faith and our lives in the hands of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. By doing so, we will also become increasingly

able to fulfill the Covenant of Works because the Holy Spirit sanctifies us into the kinds of people who can be faithfully obedient.

