

What's the Message – Lesson 77

We conclude our study of Unit Five with a review of the prophets up to the Babylonian captivity.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We confess, heavenly Father, that we have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, and like the Children of Israel, have not loved You with all our heart. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment, but we pray, for the sake of Your Son, Jesus the Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us. Amen.

Teacher, we have covered a lot of ground in this Unit, and it seems appropriate that we review it and tie it all together.

Absolutely, Dale. But before we go any further, let us all back up and remember God's covenant with Abraham. Because that covenant is what the prophets are preaching. There are three points in Genesis chapter 12, verse two: first, *I will make of you a great nation*; second, *I will bless you*; and third, *so that you will be a blessing*.

Yes, and in chapter 17 God enlarges on this and adds some detail, but then emphasizes this statement in verse 10: *This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you*. If there was any doubt before, it certainly was cleared up when Yahweh issued the Ten Commandments. In Exodus chapter 20, verse 3, it is stated succinctly and firmly, *You shall have no other gods before me*.

But as we have seen throughout this series of studies, Israel kept forgetting that commandment, and strayed away from Yahweh, putting other things first as gods in their lives. And although God is patient and forgiving, there is a limit. Simply put, this is the message of the prophets. From Amos onward, they warned the divided kingdom that this limit had been reached, and God was about to execute His judgment. It was a message of both Law and Gospel.

Had they become a great nation, as promised? Yes. At one point they were large enough and prominent enough to be a voice for God

among all the other nations. But what did they do when they had reached that pinnacle?

They squabbled among themselves and divided their country into two competing parts. Then it got even worse.

They became a lawless mob, with little or no social consciousness; the priesthood was full of graft and the people didn't care. And the false prophets lulled the people deeper into sleep.

On the outside it appeared that they were religious. They fulfilled the required sacrificial offerings at the temple. As we would express it today, they were regular church-goers. They would claim that they had the temple of the Lord in their midst – so surely they were God's people! But what was the intended purpose of the temple? Was it meant to be a means to achieve a purpose, an end? Indeed, it was to remind them that Yahweh was in their presence, and they had a responsibility to fulfill. The temple was intended to be a means to help them be the blessing they were called to be. But what had they made of it? Did they worship the One who resided inside that temple, or did they worship the building itself by counting on it to protect them in any time of trouble?

Other parts of the covenant had been turned into an empty ritual also. They had forgotten why God had given them the promised land in the first place. Amos cried out against those who turned justice into poison. And Jonah was angry when the Lord saw that Nineveh had repented of their evil ways, and spared them. This was a distortion of the command to be a separated people. Israel now saw itself as superior to other nations, because they were the chosen people of God. They could not see themselves as sinners, equal with the people of Nineveh before God.

The ritual of circumcision had become a meaningless exercise. Its original purpose had been to mark God's chosen people as His own. It was meant to make them focus upon God their Father and Savior. But what had they done? Jeremiah said to them, *Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised but yet uncircumcised . . . and all the* Again, they had made a means to be an end in itself.

The prophets also called Israel to return to the Lord of the Covenant. As Jeremiah says in chapter 3, beginning with verse three: *Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness. Behold, we come to thee; for Thou art the Lord, our God. Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.*

As we have said before, the prophets also pointed to the future. Generally accepted as the greatest vision of the future are the words of Isaiah about a coming Messiah, the One who would sit on the throne of David forever, leading the purified remnant that would come through the punishment.

Yet, even in His eternal lordship, this noble One will also be a Suffering Servant. And Jeremiah builds on this view of the future with the concept of a new era, with a new covenant written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). It would be a new era of peace, and people from far and near would turn to the new Jerusalem to learn the eternal truths of God. As Isaiah says in chapter 2, verses 2 and 3: *It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us His ways, and that we may walk in His paths."*

May this be the watchword for all of us, too.

Next time we will begin our study of Unit Six with the prophet Ezekiel.