

What's the Message – Lesson 86

Today our challenge is to summarize the major themes of the entire Old Testament.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Almighty God, we pray that you grant your Church the wisdom that comes only through your Holy Word . . . that these studies will edify and strengthen your people . . . and that in steadfast faith we may continue to serve You throughout our lives. Amen.

The very first major theme that we encountered was given in the opening words of Genesis: the fact that God is and has created this world and everything in it. Secondly that man was created to have a perfect relationship with God, and with His creation. The third, and most critical theme is that Adam was not content with perfection, but wanted more, to be like God. And so he rebelled, and the perfect relationship with God was destroyed. Sin now entered the world, and with it, death.

But even with that first breaking of God's command, God promised that He would send a special descendant from the seed of the woman to conquer Satan and restore mankind to God's family. This promise we saw as a pronouncement of the coming of Jesus. In the meantime, sin multiplies and spreads, and each generation in turn "was only evil continually." Not even the events of the great flood and Noah, or the pride at the Tower of Babel could stem that spread of sin. But God reached out, and chose a man we know as Abraham to be His voice to the world. And He made a covenant with Abraham, a covenant that involved material gifts that provided Israel the tools they would need to reach out and be a blessing to the rest the world. This covenant, we asserted, was the central theme throughout the rest of the Old Testament. It was not a one-way agreement, however. It did require the full trust and obedience of His chosen people.

We saw God giving Abraham and his descendants the visible sign of circumcision to mark them as one of God's own. We saw examples of selection and separation, that God chose people to be His special servants, not on the basis of birth or privilege, but on the basis of the heart-centered trust in Him. They would have to separate themselves from the pagan

world around them, and practice a pure monotheism. They would be tested again and again in this regard.

As we said in Lesson 20, “with the stories of Hagar and Ishmael, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, the family of Jacob, and finally the life of Joseph, we have a sequence of examples of how separation and selection would happen, and the tests that would be placed before these people.”

We saw lessons of learning to trust continue throughout the life of Moses, the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, the initial wanderings in the desert, receiving the Ten Commandments and civil law, the sin of the golden calf, the institution of atonement for the forgiveness of their sins, and the preparation of their entrance into the promised land.

In all these lessons we saw both sides, the success associated with keeping God’s commandments, and the failure that inevitably followed when they were broken. We saw the success of their conquest of Canaan, but also the failure and punishment that came when they turned away from Yahweh and chose to bow down to Baal and other gods. We saw in the book of Judges, then again in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the repeated pattern of peace and prosperity when they obeyed God, but tragedy and punishment when they chose to disobey. But God was patient and forgiving for these stubborn people who could never learn the importance of complete trust and full obedience. It was the continual contrast of Law and Gospel.

We had stated that everything that followed God’s covenant with Abraham was commentary, that it was a series of examples of the good things that happen when we obey God, and the bad things that happen when we don’t. These are not just recitations of the history of a people, but lessons for us to learn from, as these lessons definitely apply to us also.

For example, we saw that there were good kings and there were bad kings. Saul started well, but soon began trusting in himself more than he did in God. King David was a man that God could use, but he was anything but perfect. Solomon, like Saul before him, began well, but turned his heart away from God and toward the luxuries of

life. The divided kingdom soon followed, and there was a continuing parade of unfaithful kings, punctuated every now and then by the brief appearance of a faithful king.

During the time of the divided kingdom, the priests in the Northern kingdom of Israel were faithful to the king, and not to Yahweh. The people only too willingly followed their leaders. During the periods when apostate kings ruled in Judah, much the same thing happened. This called for the sternest condemnations of the prophets, who preached faithfulness and obedience to God.

From Amos all the way through Jeremiah and the Babylonian captivity it was a never-ending battle over the hearts and the minds of the nation. Whom would they bow to, Yahweh, the Creator of the world, or Baal, a god made out of stone by a man. The prophets preached the covenant-based theology under which Israel had been born. Over and over again, in various ways, they repeated the contrast of Law and Gospel. But this required acceptance of a duty, something they had – like us – great difficulty in performing on a consistent basis.

Defeat by the Babylonians and subjugation in captivity was a hard blow for the Jews to accept as just punishment for their failure to keep God's Law. You would think that finally they had learned their lesson. But no, even this was not enough to produce a lasting repentance. The prophets Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi continued the same battle that had been fought for centuries. Even the declaration of dedication to God's Law, under the leadership of Ezra, became distorted into a hard legalism.

In many ways it is the sorry tale of the history of a very stubborn people. But now, it is time for each of us to ask ourselves the question: What's the Message? How does this have any application to us? We might not bow to an idol, but have we replaced Yahweh with a new god, the god of materialism, greed, and self-centeredness?

Can we see ourselves failing . . . for generation after generation . . . to be faithful to The Almighty Lord of Hosts and keeping Him first in our lives, just like the Children of Israel did?

When we can see that this is true, and we recognize that we are just as guilty as they were, then we will see that the message of the Old Testament does apply to us equally. Then this study will have prepared us for the study of the coming of our Savior, Jesus, the Christ.

Next time we will begin a series on “between the testaments.”