

“Exiled”
2 Kings 17:6-18
July 25, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

It has been 200 years since Israel split into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom, which is variously called “Israel” or “Samaria” (v. 6), suffered under a series of bad kings. As a matter of fact, every single king ruling the northern kingdom is described in the same way as Hoshea, their last king, is described in verse 2 of our chapter. **“And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.”** So God brought his hand of judgment in the form of the mighty nation of Assyria, who took Israel into exile around the year 722 B.C. The southern kingdom, Judah, had some good kings sprinkled in with their many bad kings, with the result that their national life was prolonged by another 150 years. But the same thing would eventually happen to them as the Babylonians would take them into exile around 586 B.C.

The passage we are looking at today is something of a postmortem for Israel. It answers the question of how things came to this sorry and shocking end. This outcome was especially shocking in light of God’s promises to Abraham to give to him and his descendents a land forever. In light of those promises, how could this have happened? Does the exile prove God to be untrue? The answer of our passage is that the promise of God does not nullify the judgment of God upon sin. Israel was taken into exile not because God’s promises are untrue, but because sin has very real consequences.

Let’s talk a little about how we ought to approach this passage. I think we need to realize that our lives disintegrate the same way Israel’s did. I’m sure you’ve known people whose lives have disintegrated, sometimes in a shocking manner. I was led to Christ by a pastor who later left his wife and five children for a young woman 25 years younger than him, with whom he had been having an affair. I have lost track of this man and don’t know if the disintegration of his life has continued. If he has not repented, I know that his life has continued in that way. How can we guard ourselves against Israel’s outcome? What warning does this passage serve for us?

Let me answer that question with an illustration from a hobby of mine, woodworking. The tablesaw is one of the basic tools in a woodshop. It is very useful, but can also be very dangerous because the blade spins at a high speed back toward the operator. If the wood being cut gets twisted in the blade, the wood can be thrown back toward the operator. In order to help prevent this, someone using a tablesaw is instructed to look not at the blade, but at the fence which guides the wood through the blade in a straight line. As long as the edge of the board remains snugly aligned to the fence, it will not twist in the

blade. The same is true in our spiritual lives. The way to avoid the disintegration of our lives is not to focus on trying to avoid bad outcomes in life. Rather, we are to focus on aligning ourselves with the Lord. Specifically, there are three areas where this alignment needs to be focused. Let's look at them now.

I. The True Nature of Sin

In order for our lives to stay properly aligned and not disintegrate, we must remember the true nature of sin. Israel had minimized their sin. They had to have it explained to them how this judgment of exile was warranted, because to them it seemed that their sin was not so severe. We do the same, don't we? Think about the words we use to describe our sin. We use such words as mistake, weakness or poor judgment to speak of our sin. We say, "I'm just being human." Or consider the way some people apologize for their sin: "I'm sorry if I've offended you." In order to sin, we have to tell ourselves lies about the true nature of sin. In the way God speaks to Israel about her sin, we can see three common lies we tell about our sin.

The first lie we tell about our sin is that it isn't personal. No one really gets hurt by it. Notice the first statement about Israel's sin. **"The people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt"** (v. 7). It was the Lord *their* God against whom they had sinned. God was hurt. The specific sin that is named in this passage is the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is a very personal sin against God. Notice that this sin is described by saying that they have **"feared other gods"** (v. 7). To fear God is to fear his disapproval, and they feared the disapproval of other gods more than the disapproval of Jehovah. Imagine a husband who skips his wife's birthday party to go to a movie with his friends. When his wife tells him how much his actions have hurt her, he replies, "My friends would have been really disappointed if I had turned them down. I would rather have your disapproval than theirs." Such a statement reveals one's allegiance, which is for the one whose disapproval we most fear. Consider, for example, the sin of lying. People lie for a variety of reasons, but all lying has in common a fear of something as more ultimate than God. God says that we are to be committed to the truth. So if we exaggerate the truth in order to make ourselves look a little better, we are fearing our personal idol of looking good more than we are fearing God.

A second lie we tell ourselves about sin is stated in verse 9. **"The people of Israel did secretly against the Lord their God things that were not right."** Not only do we say, "No one will be hurt," but also "No one will know." Sin leads us into living double lives, one public and the other secret. If you are having trouble seeing your sin, just answer this question. "Is there anything in my life, any thoughts, words or actions, that, if it were announced during one of our morning worship services, would make me want to walk out of here and

never come back again?” One of the Bible’s teachings is that secrecy is a doomed strategy. Jesus taught that **“on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak”** (Matt. 12:36). He also said, **“Nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light”** (Luke 8:17).” There was an article in the *New York Times* this week about the consequences of ignoring the ability of the internet’s memory, particularly on certain social sites. For example, a 16-year-old British girl complained on Facebook about how bored she was in her office job. Her employers saw the statement and fired her. Imagine a website where everything we did and thought was uploaded, not just what we would choose to upload, and nothing could ever be erased. The Bible says that judgment day will be something like that. Those who give themselves permission to sin with the comfort that the sin will remain secret, will be proven shamefully wrong.

A third lie we tell ourselves about sin is that no one really cares because our sin is not a big problem. Instead, it is unusual and isolated occurrence. But notice what is said in verse 15. **“They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them.”** Their sin came out of a heart that hated God, as well as the words from his mouth. We like to think of our sin as more neutral and benign than this, like the time when Wendy had the wrong setting on the clippers she was using to cut my hair and left a big swath of short hair up the back of my head. It was an honest mistake. But our sins are not that way, according to the Bible. Whether we know our hearts or not, the Bible says that it is from the attitude of the heart that these sins spring. We sin because we hate God and don’t want him in our lives. We regard such things as prayer, worship and Bible reading undesirable tasks because our hearts just don’t want God.

II. The True Nature of Judgment

The exile was God’s judgment upon Israel for their sin. Exile was part of the strategy employed by conquering nations. These nations realized that it would not be enough to defeat a nation’s army and make that defeated nation pay taxes. That might work for a while, but eventually this forced subjugation of another people would lead to a revolt, and you would have to do the same thing all over again. So exile was part of a strategy to defeat utterly another nation, including the defeat of its culture. It was an attempt to assimilate the conquered people completely into your own nation. What Assyria wanted from Israel was for this land to become thoroughly Assyrian. If you’re a fan of *Star Trek*, think of the Borg, who say, “Resistance is futile; prepare to assimilate.”

Their assimilation strategy had two steps. The first step was to forcibly relocate and reeducate all the leaders of the nation who had not been killed in the battle for the nation. Only the poorest, most insignificant and most feeble

would be allowed to remain in the land. Everyone else would be relocated to Assyria to learn the language and ways of that nation. The second step in their assimilation strategy was to resettle in the land of Israel those who had previously been conquered and assimilated from other nations. This would have felt to Israel like the end of their nation, as they were forcibly marched for weeks to their new home in Assyria. The chances were very high that they would never return again to their beloved Holy Land.

Let me point out a couple of things about this judgment of exile. First, like all God's judgments, it is especially suited to the sin. Throughout the Bible, God's judgment is simply giving people what they want. Israel hated God, including his law and his covenant. So there is a sense in which the exile is simply giving people what they want. Now they can leave the land where the God they hate has chosen to live.

Second, they had misinterpreted God's patience to mean that he would never step in to bring this judgment. For two hundred years, ever since Jeroboam had wrested the kingdom from Solomon's son, Rehoboam, Israel had been pursuing this path of idolatry. Since they had been living this way so long, and life had been continuing mostly in a normal pattern, they became convinced that God would not intervene with such a judgment. They misinterpreted the patience of God. The correct interpretation of God's patience is found in one of the prophets whose ministry took place in Israel during the 200 years of their decline prior to the exile. Most of the prophets ministered in Judah, but Hosea and Amos were prophets to the northern kingdom. God directs Hosea to marry a woman who becomes a prostitute. He was to become a living illustration of what God had done in joining himself to Israel, who had become like a prostitute in her idolatrous unfaithfulness. Yet even in her unfaithfulness, God cries out about his adulterous wife, Israel, **"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender"** (Hosea 11:8). God's hand of judgment had been stayed not because he didn't see their sin, or didn't care that they sinned or wasn't hurt by their sin. Rather, it was because of his patience and compassion that he had delayed judgment. But delayed judgment is not the same as cancelled judgment.

III. The True Nature of Salvation

It is interesting that the author of 2 Kings doesn't follow Israel and its kings into Assyria, picking up the story there. Rather, he stays with the land and describes what happens to the land after the exile. As we've already noted, the Assyrians resettled other peoples into the land in an attempt to make this area thoroughly Assyrian in its culture. But it didn't work as they planned. Verse 25 picks up the story. **"And at the beginning of their dwelling there, they did not fear the Lord. Therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed**

some of them.” It goes on to report how the king of Assyria sent back a priest to instruct these new residents in the law of God so that they might learn to fear the Lord.

What is the meaning of this incident? It happens because God has established this land as his home. It is unlike any other place in the ancient world, simply because God had chosen to set it apart as his holy land. He drove out the Canaanites because they were unholy. For the same reason, he drove his own people, Israel, into exile. This was God’s Holy Land, and they had not acted in a holy manner. It is still his holy land, even though Israel is in exile, and any who take up residence in God’s land must also be set apart or die. In God’s great project to reclaim his creation after the rebellion of the human race, he has established this outpost as his place, and he will not let it go. What we see in this incident is simply the determination of God to pursue his world for the purpose of blessing.

When Judah will go into exile 150 years from the time of this passage, the temple will be destroyed. But still God doesn’t give up his foothold on this land. He will return a small remnant of his people to this place, and eventually one will come from that remnant who is the perfect temple. The first temple was unable to make Israel holy. The flesh and blood temple, Jesus, will make holy a multitude. He will also make holy the entire earth. God will not let go of his world until blessing is secured for all. He is indeed the hound of heaven. He pursues us with the same determination of blessing. Listen to these words from J. R. Tolkien, commenting on Francis Thompson’s poem, *The Hound of Heaven*.

As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and steady pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by his divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide itself, divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after, till the soul feels its pressure forcing it to turn to him alone in that never ending pursuit.

CONCLUSION:

The blessing God is pursuing for the world comes only through Jesus. Imagine if all your sins were posted to your Facebook page. I understand that once something is on Facebook, it never completely goes away. Even if you delete it from being visible to others, it is still out there on some server somewhere. Our sins are like that, too. We may think that no one will know when we sin, that they can be kept secret. But they are permanently recorded, with only one force in the universe powerful enough to erase them permanently—the blood of Jesus. Are you lined up with the truth about sin, judgment and salvation? It is the only way to keep our lives from disintegrating. We line them up through faith in Jesus.