

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 7 – God speaks to His people

Key Question:

- How can the problem of sin finally be dealt with so that God's Kingdom can really be restored?

The Kingdom Divided and Defeated [I Kings Ch 12-22, II Kings, II Chronicles Ch 11-36]

After Solomon died in 930 BC the kingdom was divided into two parts as God had foretold, with the majority of the people rejecting David's descendants as kings, just as God had told Solomon. These two separate kingdoms were:

Israel– to the north, with its capital in Samaria, including ten of the twelve tribes of Israel

Israel's first king was Jeroboam, who led ten tribes away from David's dynasty. He was afraid that if his people went to Jerusalem in Judah to worship God they would be tempted to return their loyalty to David's dynasty, so he set up two golden calves for them to worship (I Kings 12:25-30). This act of rebellion against God for his own political gain set the tone for the future of Israel. Israel had 19 kings over the next 208 years, none of them from the family of David, and none of them worshipping God alone. The kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and many Jews were taken into Exile from Israel to Assyria. Many of them were assimilated by Assyria and never returned.

Judah – to the south, with its capital in Jerusalem, including two tribes (Judah and Benjamin)

The first King of Judah was Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Judah had 19 kings over the following 344 years, all of them from David's family (and one evil queen, Athaliah who was the daughter of Jezebel, widow of King Jehoram of Judah and sister of King Jehoram of Israel). Although they had the Temple and Jerusalem, the nation of Judah also soon became involved in worship of idols. Despite the efforts of some good Kings (notably Josiah – see II Kings 22-23) to restore the nation to God, the general trend was away from Him. Jerusalem was finally conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC and a few years later they destroyed the city and the Temple. Many people from Judah were taken in Exile to Babylon.

Question: Why did God allow his people to be taken out of the land He gave them into Exile?

Answer: They had failed to keep the Covenant that God had made with them

Even before the people of Israel entered Canaan God had warned them that they could only live in the land as long as they were obedient to His covenant with them (Deuteronomy 28:1, 15, 64). When the king was a good man (in several cases in Judah, but never in Israel), the people tended to worship God, but when the king was bad they began to worship false gods and idols. Generally over time the kings of both Israel and, more gradually, Judah became increasingly sinful. They broke God's Law, oppressed the poor people within Israel, and failed to show God to other nations. Even though they made sacrifices to God, their hearts were far from Him and full of sin, so their sacrifices were not acceptable to God. God warned the Israelites about this many times through men called prophets (see books like Amos), but they would not listen. The prophets describe the Israelites as a wife who was not faithful to her husband – they had broken their marriage vows (a picture of God's covenant with them). The Exile to Assyria and Babylon was, therefore, a judgement from God on His people because of their sin (see II Kings 17:1-23; Jeremiah 22:8-9). The northern kingdom (Israel) was judged first because their sin was greater, but Judah followed 136 years later.

God's people were no longer in His place under His rule. The Kingdom of God could not be made perfect on earth until the problem of sin was solved.

The role of the Prophets – messengers of the Covenant

The prophets were people who spoke words from God to God's people, challenging them to trust in Him and to be faithful to their covenant relationship to Him. The Old Testament prophets came from different backgrounds (some were ordinary shepherds, others were officials) but all were called specially by God to speak for Him. The prophets often spoke about Israel as being like an unfaithful wife who had broken her marriage promises to her husband. God had rescued Israel, and loved her faithfully, but she kept on leaving Him for other gods. This sad story was powerfully acted out in the life of one prophet (Hosea). When God gave prophecies He did not override the prophet's thoughts and feelings. Instead, He revealed His words through the person's own mind and personality. However, the words of prophets are the words of God, and are completely true (II Peter 1:21). Prophecies often had two perspectives – they referred to the present circumstances of God's people but also looked forward to God's future plans for the Messiah. The prophets did not fully understand the significance of the things they said, but knew that God was planning something special for the future (I Peter 1:10-12). Many of the prophets were rejected by the people and actually killed because their message, although true, was unpopular with people who wanted to live their own way rather than God's way (Luke 11:47-51).

Sixteen Old Testament books (Isaiah to Malachi) are called books of prophecy. A number of other prophets who did not write books included in the Bible are mentioned in the Old Testament. The most significant of these were **Elijah and Elisha**, who lived in the northern Kingdom of Israel around 875-797 BC (see I Kings 17- II Kings 13). They spoke out strongly against the worship of false gods and the corrupt kings of Israel in their time, and many miracles were performed during their lives. Elijah is significant because he represents all of the prophets (as Moses represents the Law).

Themes in the messages of the Prophets

1. Warnings to the Israelites that they must repent or face judgement by God

These messages came mainly before the Exile of Israel or Judah. The books of Joel, Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk contain many warnings to God's people.

2. Warnings to the enemies of Israel and Judah

Four of the prophetic books are mainly concerned with enemies of God's people: Obadiah (against Edom), Jonah (who went to the Assyrian capital Nineveh to call people to repentance), Nahum (against Assyria) and Zephaniah (against all nations). There are also messages against other nations in other prophetic books (e.g. Jeremiah 46-51).

3. Predictions about a coming Saviour for God's people (called the Messiah)

These prophecies are scattered throughout many of the prophetic books, and many prophecies about the Messiah are also found in Psalms. Examples of these predictions are discussed further below.

4. Promises about God's future kingdom including Gentile (non-Jewish) people

These prophecies (e.g. Amos 9:11-15) are often connected with the promise of the coming Messiah. They look forward to a time when people from all nations of the earth would be part of God's Kingdom.

5. Encouragement to rebuild the Temple and purify their worship of God

This was the major theme of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi after the return from the Exile.

Prophecies about the Messiah

The Old Testament contains many prophecies about a special person called the Messiah (meaning God's "anointed one" or "chosen one"). This person would bring people from all nations to know God (He would be a "Saviour", rescuing the people from the results of their sins). There are two major pictures of the Messiah in the Old Testament, and we will examine prophecies of King David (recorded in the Psalms) and Isaiah to learn about these two strands of prophecy:

A] The Conquering King who will rule forever on David's throne

There are around 500 prophecies in the Old Testament that speak of a great King who would be a descendant of David and would rule forever with justice on David's throne and defeat the enemies of God.

David's prophecy – Psalm 110

- God is speaking to David's Lord (David's King), honouring him at His own right hand (verse 1)
- This King will rule from Jerusalem over his enemies (verses 2-3)
- The King will also be a priest like Melchizedek (verse 4)
- The Lord will judge through this King (verses 5-7)

Isaiah's prophecy – Isaiah 11:1-10 (see also Isaiah 42 – the Servant of God)

- A new branch will arise from David's family (verses 1-2)
- This King will be obedient to God, ruling in absolute justice (verses 3-5)
- In His Kingdom the Curse will be undone – animals will no longer fight each other or attack humans (verses 6-8)
- All people on earth will know God, and this King will draw all nations to Himself (verses 9-10)

B] The Suffering Servant who would die for the sins of the people

There are around 300 prophecies in the Old Testament that speak of a servant of God who would be rejected by the people, suffer and die as a sacrifice for sins.

David's prophecy – Psalm 22:1-18

- He will be forsaken by God despite his faith in Him (verses 1-5)
- He will be mocked by others even though He has always been faithful to God (verses 6-10)
- He will have extreme thirst at a time when He is surrounded by His enemies (verses 11-16)
- His hands and feet will be pierced, and His clothes divided among his enemies using lots (verses 17-18)

Isaiah's prophecy – Isaiah 52:13-53:12

- The Servant will be highly exalted (52:13)
- He will be severely beaten and disfigured (52:14) and will be rejected by God's people (53:1-3)
- He will suffer for the sins of others, but He will have no sin, and will be silent when He is tried (53:4-9)
- His death is a sacrifice for sins and will make it possible for many to be made righteous (53:10-12)
- He Himself will see the results of His suffering, and will be honoured for it (53:11, 12)

Who could fulfil these prophecies?

Jewish scholars had different opinions about whether these two strands of prophecy would be fulfilled in one person, or whether they were speaking about two different people. By the time of Jesus most Jewish people expected the Messiah to be the Conquering King, but not the Suffering Servant, because they could not imagine how someone who was obedient to God suffering in the way the Suffering Servant would. However, during His lifetime on earth, Jesus fulfilled every one of the prophecies about the Suffering Servant (for example, Psalm 22 describes His crucifixion and Isaiah 53 explains its spiritual significance). The *Module 1 Study Aids* contain a chart showing a sample of 25 Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. The fulfilment of many of these prophecies was impossible for Him to control – they often depended on the choices and actions of others. The accuracy of Old Testament prophecy is an amazing proof of the truth of the Bible.

So, then, Jesus was the Suffering Servant of God who came to die for the sins of the people. In the New Testament studies we will also see how in the future Jesus will fulfil the Old Testament prophecies about the Conquering King when He returns to earth a second time. **Jesus came to bring God's Kingdom to completion by dealing with the problem of sin!**

Key Lesson: the Old Testament looks forward to the Messiah, a Saviour for all nations

The problem of sin could only finally be dealt with by the coming of God's chosen One, the Messiah. He would be both a Conquering King, who would bring in the perfect Kingdom of God by bringing judgement and defeating God's enemies, and a Suffering Servant who would die as the perfect sacrifice for sins. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant during His life and death on earth, and will return as the Conquering King in the future.