

CHAPTER 16, THE BEGINNING OF THE END

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD DEALS WITH DISOBEDIENCE, BUT HIS COMPASSION NEVER ENDS.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

For 209 years, the northern kingdom of Israel had endured one evil king after another. Their failure to keep God's covenant meant they would be expelled from the covenant. They had been chosen to be a blessing to all other nations, but now they would be delivered over to those very nations.

Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, set up a puppet government for the northern tribes of Israel and appointed Hoshea as king. Hoshea was as defiant of Shalmaneser as he was of God, the true King of Israel. He stopped paying tribute and as a result, the Assyrian army destroyed the capital city of Samaria and captured Hoshea. The king, along with many of his fellow Israelites, was deported by Shalmaneser's successor, Sargon II. By resettling them throughout Assyria, God was settling His own accounts. Idolatry, disobedience, and stubbornness provoked God's anger and led Him to expel the northern kingdom from His land.

Meanwhile, just to the south in the kingdom of Judah, godly King Hezekiah was nervously watching these world-shaking events on his northern border. Hezekiah stands out from all of the other kings of Judah for his efforts to remove every vestige of idolatry in the land. He rebelled against the new Assyrian king Sennacherib. The Assyrians sent envoys, claiming that they wanted to negotiate a peaceful surrender with Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Their reasoning was faultless: What other nation had been able to stand against the Assyrian might? Had not God Himself commissioned them for this task? Sennacherib's commander appealed directly to the populace of Jerusalem, speaking to them in Hebrew.

King Hezekiah trusted in the LORD and prayed for deliverance. The prophet Isaiah promised that God would deliver them. What faith it must have taken to trust the prophet's prediction! The angel of the LORD swept through the Assyrians army as they slept. The next morning Sennacherib's camp was littered with 185,000 dead Assyrian soldiers. The army retreated and Judah was saved.

Isaiah had been called to be a prophet during the last year of King Uzziah's life. In a majestic vision of the LORD, he was commissioned to speak for God to turn the people of Judah away from sin and toward their God. He warned that Judah was walking in her sister Israel's footsteps and therefore would reap similar judgment. Unfortunately, he seldom found a listening audience.

The threat of foreign exile failed to curb the widespread social injustice, moral decay, and religious apostasy. Judah's pride would be her downfall; God loved His people too much to allow their sin to go unchecked. And although He warned of judgment, He also promised a future restoration. When Israel perceived herself as forsaken and forgotten, her compassionate God would fully restore her. The whole world would know that the LORD is their Savior and Redeemer.

What a comfort Isaiah's prophecies must have been to the faithful remnant of Judah: God's Upper Story of redemption would triumph over the sin of His people. Even the godliest of kings could not overcome the sin nature of mankind. In his most memorable passage, Isaiah described a Suffering Servant, who was "pierced for our transgressions." Looking down from the Upper Story, we can see that this was a description of the true King, who would suffer for all mankind.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Can you think of a time when you suffered an unjust punishment or consequence? What about a time when you deserved a consequence for your actions but were “let off the hook”?

1. Why did God send the northern kingdom into captivity? (See 2 Kings 17:7-17 for more details.) Compare God’s actions against Israel to Moses’ warning in Deut. 28:45-50 and 30:1-5. What do you discover?
2. God frequently reminded Israel of examples of his faithfulness, such as their deliverance from Egypt (p. 219). What past experiences have you had that remind you of God’s faithfulness? (See Romans 8:31)
3. How have you seen people respond when they receive just consequences for sinful actions? How should a Christian respond to the consequences of sin and the discipline of God?
4. King Sennacherib of Assyria sent his envoy to Jerusalem to persuade King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem to surrender peacefully, claiming he came on the LORD’s orders (p. 221). Isaiah’s message to Hezekiah said otherwise. How do you evaluate people who claim to have a word from the LORD?
5. What is King Hezekiah’s view of YHWH the God of Israel (p. 223)? What is the result of a correct understanding of God?
6. What about the vision of God in the temple made Isaiah realize that he was a sinner? Compare Isaiah’s response with Peter in Luke 5:8 and John in Rev. 1:17. What are the implications?
7. According to Isaiah’s prophecy (p. 225-226), what was the southern kingdom of Judah like? What did he say that God would do as a result?
8. Isaiah’s prophecy predicted punishment and captivity for Judah, as well as return and restoration (p. 227-228). How did Zion (Jerusalem and Judah) react to this message?
9. List the qualities of the Suffering Servant (p. 228-230). (See Matthew 8:16-17, 26:63-67; 1 Peter 2:22-25; Romans 5:19; Luke 22:37 for further insights.) What does this teach us about God’s Upper Story?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 17, THE KINGDOM'S FALL

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. List the evil practices of Manasseh that aroused the anger of the LORD. Can you find examples of any of these practices in our own community?
2. Where did Manasseh set up his altars and Asherah poles? According to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, where is the temple of God now? What are the implications for you personally?
3. What does Manasseh's redemption teach you about God? About people?

DAY 2

1. Look up 2 Chronicles 33:14-20, 23. What was Manasseh's response to the grace of God?
2. God told Ezekiel, "You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious," (p. 236). Have you ever been fearful to speak the truth?

DAY 3

1. What must it have been like to be Jeremiah as Jerusalem was destroyed? How did he view God's Upper story and His Lower story, according to his lament (p. 243-245)?
2. List the specific promises that God says He will do for Israel (p. 245-246). According to the text, what is the result of God's Spirit in you? How does it affect your life to have the Spirit in you?

