

Osaka International Church

Date: October 27th, 2008

Daniel Ellrick

Title: Israel

Scripture: Nehemiah 9

Key Verse: Isaiah 11:11-12

New Members' Welcome

Good morning and God bless you! Today I would like to spend some time summarizing the history of Israel in the Old Testament. This will give us a bridge between our study of Genesis and the Gospel of Luke study that we will begin in two weeks, and I think we will learn some important things along the way.

Genesis ends with the deaths of Jacob, also called Israel, and Joseph. By that time, the whole family of Israel was living in Egypt, but even as he was dying, Joseph remembered the Lord's promise to give them the land of Canaan. **Genesis 50:25** records, **"And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.""** The people of Israel were in Egypt, but they knew that Egypt was not their true home. Yet, all of this was according to the plan and purposes of the Lord; plans which, at least in part, had been revealed to Abraham in advance.



Back in Genesis **15:13**, we read, **"Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years."** The Lord had told Abraham about the time of suffering to come, and although life in Egypt was fine at first, as the years passed and the people of Israel multiplied, things changed. A later Pharaoh, one who did not know about Joseph, made the people of Israel into slaves, and they suffered terribly. The Pharaoh enslaved and mistreated them and, in order to prevent their numbers from increasing, he even ordered that every baby boy born of the Israelites was to be murdered at birth.



But a baby boy named Moses was saved when his mother put him in a basket and hid the basket in the reeds along the Nile River. The basket was found by Pharaoh's own daughter, and Moses was raised in Pharaoh's palace as a prince of Egypt. But after Moses was grown, he tried to help his people and ended up killing an Egyptian man. Moses fled to Midian, and there he became a shepherd and married. But years later the Lord heard the prayers of His people and appeared to Moses in a burning bush and sent him to deliver Israel from Egypt.



By the way, Nehemiah 9 is an excellent summary of this history and I put a copy of it in the bulletin for your convenience. The prayer of Nehemiah 9 says, concerning that time, **Nehemiah 9:10 "You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day."** Here, Nehemiah 9:10 refers to the ten plagues that God brought on Egypt through Moses. Many people know of these plagues, but what a lot of people don't realize is that each plague was a specific judgment against the false gods of Egypt. Pharaoh could have stopped the plagues at any time simply by letting Israel go, but Pharaoh was unwilling to let Israel go until after the last of the plagues, when all of the Egyptian gods had been proven powerless.

Finally Pharaoh let Israel go, but then he changed his mind and chased after them with his army. But Pharaoh and his army were destroyed in the sea after Israel miraculously crossed over. The Name of the Lord was established before the people of Egypt and before the whole world through the miracles that He did in Egypt. Even in our time, people are still making movies about the Exodus. One immediate result of the miracles was faith; the faith of the people of Israel was established, and other people also came to believe in God and joined Israel when they left Egypt. Exodus 12:38 tells us that many other people left Egypt with the people of Israel. These other people, who must have been Egyptians,



became part of the nation of Israel because they had believed in the God of Israel. The same thing happened many times in Israel's history, foreigners were usually able to join Israel, but they had to believe in the God of Israel and follow the ways of the Law of Moses.

This brings us to a helpful hint for understanding the Old Testament. Some people think that they see many examples of racial discrimination in the Old Testament, but they are usually misunderstanding the text. In passages where the Old Testament speaks harshly of foreigners, it is usually speaking of those who refuse to believe in the God of Israel. Foreigners of any race were normally able to join Israel if they believed in the Lord, but as soon as they joined Israel, they were no longer counted as foreigners. In fact, Numbers 12 tells of how the Lord rebuked Moses' sister for complaining about Moses marrying a Cushite, that is a black woman. The Lord has always loved people of every race. But people who opposed the Lord were counted as outsiders or foreigners.

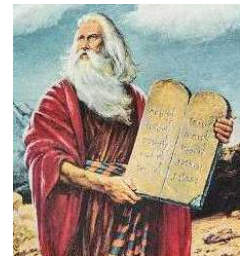


When Karen and I visited Israel, we noticed that there are Jewish people of many different races and languages, not only European or Middle Easterners, but also Asians and Africans. At one point I asked a Jewish man whether there were also some Arab Jews. He answered, *“Absolutely not, there are no Arab Jews.”* Then he continued and explained, *“There cannot be such a thing as an Arab Jew because when an Arab person becomes a Jew, he is no longer an Arab; he is just a Jew.”* In the same way, in the Old Testament foreigners who believed in the God of Israel were assimilated into Israel and they were no longer foreigners.



In the Old Testament, and to some extent still today, becoming a Jew meant giving up your old identity and joining the Jewish people and the nation of Israel. On the other hand, when we believe in Jesus and become Christians, we receive citizenship in heaven and we join the people of God, but we also retain our identity as Americans, Japanese, Filipinos, Nigerians, Chinese, etc. But our relationship with the Lord is very close, because we are adopted as God's children and become His sons and daughter, God's family.

The Law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, were given to Israel by the Lord at Sinai. **Nehemiah 9:13, “You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good.”** In the wilderness, the Lord led Israel and watched over them. The Lord even sent miraculous bread, called manna, for them to eat daily, and He gave them water in the desert, water pouring out from a rock that Moses struck with his staff.



But the people complained and rebelled against the Lord many times. **Nehemiah 9:17-18, “They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, [18] even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.”** Although they rebelled against Him many times, the Lord did not desert His people. He provided them with everything they needed, but a whole generation had to die in the wilderness before they were ready to enter the promised land.

When the time finally came for Israel to enter the land, the Lord gave them victory over the people living there. **Nehemiah 9:25, “They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.”**

When people read the history of how the Lord gave the land of Canaan to the Israelites they often have one of two reactions. Some people are emotionally on the side of Israel and the question in their mind is, *“Why did God make Israel suffer in Egypt and wait over 400 years before giving the land to them as He had promised Abraham?”* Other people are sympathetic



to the people of Canaan who were destroyed before the advancing army of Israel and they wonder, “*Why did God have Israel destroy those people?*” These are important questions, but I think that the Lord gave us the basic answers way back in Genesis 15. Right after the Lord told Abraham that his descendents would be enslaved for 400 years, the Lord also said this in **Genesis 15:16**, “**In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.**”

The Amorites are an example of one of the groups of people in the land of Canaan. After the Lord revealed Himself to the people of Canaan through Abraham, the Lord basically gave them 400 years to repent of their sins. But they did not repent, instead their sin got more and more terrible until finally the Lord destroyed them and gave their land to the people of Israel. But even in the time of destruction, the Lord still showed His grace and mercy toward those who chose to believe in Him and join the people of Israel. Even in the destruction of Jericho, we see the Lord’s mercy, for Rahab and her family are all spared, when she helps Israel, and later Rahab even becomes an ancestor of Jesus.



The Bible is very clear that the Lord does not want anyone to be destroyed. **2 Peter 3:9** tells us, “**The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**” In the case of the people of Canaan, the Lord was so patient that He gave them 400 years to repent after they were warned to stop sinning. But in the end, it was clear that they were only sinning more and more and going further and further from the Lord. The Lord is patient, but He will not wait forever before judging people who do evil, and in the end the nations of Canaan were destroyed. But as in the example of Rahab, the Lord was always ready to accept those who trusted in Him. Such people were added to Israel, and soon they were no longer considered foreigners.

Isaiah 56:6-7 shows us the Lord’s attitude clearly. “**And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant-- [7] these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.**”

God chose Abraham and from Abraham God brought forth Israel and the Jewish people, the Lord’s chosen nation and people. But in this there is no trace of prejudice or of unfairness to other races and peoples, there is only God’s sovereign choice to demonstrate His power and glory in a special way through one particular people. Sometimes in their history the Jewish people have misunderstood this, and that history is also recorded in the Bible. Yet, when we read the Scriptures carefully, we see that God’s love for all peoples and nations is clearly revealed throughout the Bible. God loves each and every person.

After they entered the land, for a time the people of Israel were ruled by judges, men and women who like Deborah, Gideon, and Samson. At that time, the Lord was the only King in Israel, but these judges led the people in crisis and settled disputes. Later the people of Israel demanded that the Prophet Samuel choose a king for them, and Samuel anointed Saul as king.

King Saul was followed by King David, and King Solomon. Israel reached its peak as a nation under King David and King Solomon, but after their time, Israel was divided into two nations, Israel in the north, and Judah in the south.

From the beginning, the Lord had often sent prophets to warn people away from sin and to encourage them to do what was right. But in the time of the divided kingdom, we see a constant stream of prophets coming to warn the people to turn back from sin and to follow the true God. In particular, the Prophet Elijah and the Prophet Elisha constantly warned the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but they did not repent, but instead continued to sin in idol worship.

After giving them many chances to repent, the Lord finally allowed the

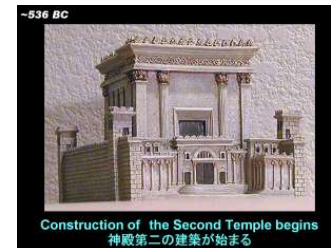


Assyrian Empire to conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel and they were taken into captivity. This is where the idea of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel comes from, but it is partially in error, because although many members of the Ten Tribes went into captivity and never returned, the faithful members of the Ten Tribes who continued to worship the Lord had already fled to the Southern Kingdom before the Assyrians came. The Ten Tribes lost their identity as tribes, but their people were not all lost.



The Southern Kingdom of Judah did better than the Northern Kingdom of Israel, but even though they had several good kings, in the end they also were judged by the Lord and were sent away into captivity after they failed to heed the warnings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets. The Babylonian Empire came and invaded Judah and many were taken away to Babylon. This is the time of the Prophets Ezekiel and Daniel; it is the Babylonian Captivity, which lasted for 70 years.

But eventually, after the Persian Empire conquered Babylon, the Jews, as they had come to be called, were allowed to return home. Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt, but not to their former beauty. This the time of the prayer in Nehemiah 9, and in their prayer they said to the Lord, (**Nehemiah 9:33-34**), **“In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. [34] Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them.”**



One hundred years after this, the people have again fallen into many sins and the Old Testament ends with the warnings of the Prophet Malachi. And then in the time between the Old and New Testaments there is the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great, the time of the revolt of the Maccabees, and the beginning of time of the Roman Empire. After the time of Jesus, the Jews were scattered throughout the world. But today, they are back in the land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants. In our time, we are seeing the fulfillment of Isaiah 11:11-12 and other promises about the reestablishment of Israel. **Isaiah 11:11-12, “In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. [12] He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.”** But that is another story.



I. Conclusion

All of the Old Testament is profitable for study and we have much to learn from it. But perhaps one of the most important lessons is the clear demonstration of our fallen humanity. In the Scriptures we see the record of a people who were chosen, blessed, and watched over by God Himself. And yet, again and again they fell into sin. They made many attempts to reform themselves. Nehemiah records one of those attempts. After the prayer, **Nehemiah 9:38** says. **“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”**



They bound themselves with a promise to obey the Law of the Lord and stamped it with their seals. But it was not long before they fell into sin again. Have you ever tried something like that? Have you ever firmly resolved to live righteously and to stop sinning? How did that work for you? Not so good, I would bet. Our own experience and all of the record of the Old Testament show that even the best efforts of the best men or best women with the best intentions always fall short. No amount of effort or resolve can enable us to obey the law and do what is right. Every one of us, every person, desperately needs the grace of God.



Our own experience shows this and all of the Old Testament demonstrates it. But all of the Old Testament also points forward to God’s solution to the problem of sin and His provision of grace at the cross of Jesus Christ. We cannot save ourselves. But, **Romans 5:8** comforts, **“But God demonstrates his own**

love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Salvation from sin is found only through faith in Jesus Christ, His death on the cross, and His resurrection.

II. Closing Prayer