

An Idolatrous People Receive Judgment

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: God’s love for His people leads Him to warn them of their idolatry and to discipline them so that they might repent.

BACKGROUND PASSAGE: 2 Kings 17

People like to “hedge their bets,” especially in the realm of finances: invest a little bit here, throw some cash into that option, save a few resources for this venture. The idea is to spread it all around. That way if you take a loss in one area, it doesn’t devastate you. There’s an opportunity to stay afloat and possibly recover what you lost. This diversification seems like a wise way to invest your money.

The people of Israel also sought to “hedge their bets,” looking for other sources of security and support rather than throwing all of their faith and trust in with God and believing that He alone could save them. But their spiritual diversification was unwise, resulting in disaster in all areas of life.



What are some ways people try to diversify their trust in things other than God?

Group Time

Point 1: Idolatry results when people fail to see God's goodness (2 Kings 17:6-12).

⁶ In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

⁷ And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods ⁸ and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. ⁹ And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. ¹⁰ They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, ¹¹ and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, ¹² and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this."

All the commands that God had given His people were **good** and wise, but the Israelites disobeyed them. Rather than trusting that their greatest joy and fulfillment was found in obedience to God and His law, His people sought out their own ways. Their hearts were set on being satisfied, as are all our hearts, but they pursued idols, nations, and evil that would never satisfy. Only our **good** God can satisfy the desires of our hearts.



How have you seen people disobey God's good commands in a fruitless attempt to find their greatest joy?

All the nations of the world, such as Egypt and Assyria, were full of sinners before God and deserving of His wrath, which eventually came. Yet God had never revealed His law to these other nations or made a covenant with them. But Israel? God had blessed them uniquely. They were His people, and He was their God (Ex. 6:7). He had given them His **covenant** and His **law**. How much more did they deserve the full wrath of God when they had been shown so much more clearly who He was and yet disobeyed!



What are some ways God has revealed His goodness to you?

Point 2: Idolatry prevents people from heeding God's warnings (2 Kings 17:13-17).

¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets."

¹⁴ But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them. ¹⁶ And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. ¹⁷ And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

Many stories throughout the Old Testament describe the anger of the Israelites when the prophets showed up with their messages of God's will. Prophets were threatened, imprisoned, and even killed because their words spoke against the hearts and actions of the people to whom they were speaking. But each time they came, it was always grace. In love, God was pointing out the sin of His people so that they could see it and repent.



What are some reasons people find it difficult to repent of their sin?

For more than two hundred years, the Lord had allowed His people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel to live in the promised land as their own nation, though nearly the whole time they had been engaged in idol worship. Israel must have thought that the day of reckoning for their sin would never come: "Surely there will be more patience. Perhaps God has forgotten or doesn't notice." But Israel was a land of fools. The days of God's patience would end. Apart from sincere repentance, judgment was coming.

Sin as Idolatry: In Scripture, idolatry usually refers to bowing down to a statue made of wood or gold, worshiping created things instead of the _____. But idolatry can take on more _____ forms: a seeking of approval, security, power, pleasure, etc.

Point 3: Idolatry leads people to experience God's discipline (2 Kings 17:18-20).

¹⁸ Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. ¹⁹ Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs that Israel had introduced. ²⁰ And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel and afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until he had cast them out of his sight.

The earthly consequence of Israel continuing in sin against God was exile at the hands of the Assyrians. But when their discipline is framed in terms of removal from God's presence (v. 18), we begin to understand the spiritual significance of sin. Sin had built up a wall between Israel and God. Sin had robbed them of the only thing that could truly satisfy the longing of their hearts—God Himself—so the Lord handed them over to what they wanted—separation from Him.

Voices from the Church

"[God] exercises patience and long-suffering toward human sinfulness. The nature of God, however, demands that he respond with holy disapproval to that which is contrary to his very being."¹

—R. Stanton Norman

How would you describe your present experience of the presence of God in your life?

The people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah were sinning against God in the same way as the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Judah was just as deserving of judgment from the Lord, but God withheld judgment from them at this time. As the people of Judah watched Israel undergo the consequences from the Lord for their idolatry, it should have served as a wake-up call to them, and to some degree, it did. But soon judgment would also come for Judah for their own commitment to rebellion against the Lord.



What are some ways God disciplines His people to lead them to repentance?

Daily Study

Day 1: Read 2 Kings 17:1-5

King Hoshea of Israel committed treachery against the king of Assyria. He balked on his promise to pay tribute to the Assyrians and turned instead to another nation for salvation. Through Egypt's hand, he hoped to be spared from service to the Assyrian Empire. The plan failed miserably and Israel found itself under siege from the powerful army of Assyria for three years—until the people were ultimately defeated and led away from their land in captivity.

Treason against the mighty Assyrian king was not tolerated and instead punished with severe consequences—either bow down and serve faithfully or face the wrath of the king and his might. If this was true of an earthly king, then why did the Israelites not fear the anger of their heavenly King?

Each person in this world has committed treason against God, the King of all creation. He is the rightful ruler, but everyone has failed to faithfully serve Him and pay Him the honor and glory He is due.

What consequences await such actions? A wrath much greater than that of an earthly king—an infinite and eternal wrath. No Egypt or Baal could protect anyone from such anger. Only God can protect us from His wrath, and so He did. He poured out all of His anger on His Son for our treason against Him. God alone could save us from God.



Why should we see our sins, even those against others, as first and foremost against God?

Day 2: Read 2 Kings 17:6-12

It seems so illogical to us that Israel would ever follow after other gods. The Lord had delivered them out of Egypt with so many demonstrations of His great power and then brought them into this promised land, a place flowing with milk and honey. After all of this, they would turn and worship idols of metal and stone?

But the truth of sin is that it is *always* illogical, always deceitful. It always tempts us to think we are acting in wisdom when we are on the path of foolishness. If Israel was wrong to turn their backs on a God who had done so much for them, what about us? We look back not at a deliverance from Egypt and Pharaoh but to our rescue from sin and death. Our salvation came not through plagues but through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. When we sin, we too are illogical, turning away from worshiping the God who has saved us and instead turning to idols that we have made. But the gospel is the good news that God rescues foolish sinners like us.



When was a time you were able to see your sin for what it was—foolish and illogical?

Day 3: Read 2 Kings 17:13-17

“They went after false idols and became false” (v. 15). We will become like what we worship. God made human beings in His image and ordained that we would worship Him and be like Him. With the fall, we turned our worship away from Him to all manner of created things. As Israel pursued false gods and lifeless idols, the people became like what they worshiped. As these stone and metal idols were deaf and blind, the people followed suit and closed their ears and eyes to the glory of God. These so-called gods produced hearts that desired death, and the people killed their children as sacrifices.

We too were worthless in our worship of worthless things. Jesus died and rose again to free our hearts for worship to God so that we could become like the One who made us. We have been instructed to fix our eyes on Jesus and to be transformed into His likeness from one degree of glory to the next (2 Cor. 3:18). Each day of this life, we are being sanctified to become more like the God we worship. In the age to come, finally and fully free from sin, we will be the perfect image-bearers we were always meant to be.



Looking back over the past year, what is one area in which you have seen God conforming you more to the image of Christ?

Day 4: Read 2 Kings 17:18-20

God handed His people over to plunderers. Assyria was waiting in the wings, ready to besiege Israel, but only by the sovereign hand of the Lord were they able to carry out their evil intentions. Assyria was always a tool in the hand of God. The Lord would deal with His sinful and idolatrous people, and though Assyria was only hungry for power, the king did not know that his heart was in the hand of the Lord, being turned whichever way He wished (Prov. 21:1).

God has used and will use even the sinful intentions of human beings to carry out His will. When Jesus went to the cross, many wicked hearts led Him there (see Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28). But these gruesome acts were all prophesied long ago. And before they were prophesied, they were planned by the Father. Jesus was foreknown before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20-21), and at the right time, He died on the cross according to the will of God (Rom. 5:6). Each evil heart that brought Jesus to the cross was used by God to carry out His plan. Though sinful man is free to carry out the desires of his heart, these desires still serve the plan of God.



How have you experienced people's evil intent against you being used by God for your good?

Day 5: Read 2 Kings 17:21-41

The foreigners newly planted in Israel were unsure how to worship Yahweh, the God of the land, but the lion attacks brought an urgency to learn. This knowledge did not accomplish true worship. These new settlers believed that Yahweh was just like any other god. They were happy to add Him to their pile of idols and offer Him worship along with all the others because they simply wanted to avoid the consequences of His anger.

Many of us today try to tack on God to our worship. The people of this story offer us insight that we need: *Halfhearted worship is no worship at all.* If we have only turned to God out of fear of the consequences of His anger, not regarding Him as our greatest treasure, then is this really worship? True Christians are not ones who run to God merely to avoid hell; they run to Him because they see He is the only God worthy of all worship.



What difference do you see in your life when your obedience and worship flow out of treasuring God versus hoping to avoid consequences from Him?

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A Word from the Editor



Trevin Wax

General Editor—*The Gospel Project*
AUTHOR OF MULTIPLE BOOKS, INCLUDING
*This Is Our Time: Everyday Myths in
Light of the Gospel*

The prophetic books of the Old Testament can be confusing, both to the newcomer to the Bible and the longtime reader.

Where do these prophets fit in the overall narrative of Israel and Judah? What messages did they communicate? What was God doing in and through their work? The benefit of this volume of *The Gospel Project* is that it gives you a glimpse of the prophets right at the point their message was going forth to God's people. We can ask questions of God with Habakkuk, look forward to the coming Suffering Servant with Isaiah, stand amazed at the stunning picture of relentless love in Hosea, and learn something of God's extravagant love with Jonah.

As you work through the sessions in this volume, keep an eye on all the different ways God reveals Himself and communicates His messages of judgment and grace. Fall to your knees in awe, and then stand up and boldly proclaim the love of this great God, who inspired the prophets to deliver His word.

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