

Pastor's Note

Hello

We've been talking about the character of God. As we looked at God's holiness and justice I used concrete examples from the Word of God to show God's character. Today I want to expand our understanding of God's character by looking at mercy from the perspective of God's overall plan. Sort of a big picture view if you will. I want to start with a context. What has God been doing with the human race over time and how can we tell if those actions have led to us taking on His character? Let's begin.

God had a close personal relationship with Adam and Eve in the Garden. He experienced His creation as we were designed to exist. We ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and we were separated from God. And over time every intent of the thoughts of our hearts became only evil continually, Genesis 6:5. God's justice went into effect and he sent the flood to wipe out the human race. Noah was the fresh start. Now as the plan unfolds we see God making His covenant with Abraham and beginning to develop a small portion of the human race separate from the rest of the world. The Israelites were developed in an incubator. God specifically chose one person and began developing that person's descendants in a special way. A way that was designed for two specific reasons; 1. To teach us God's character and 2. To create the conditions necessary for us to be able to understand the coming of Jesus Christ and its meaning for all humanity. This is God's overall purpose for the Jewish people in the context of the larger world.

The nation of Israel has its roots in God's covenant to Abraham around 2091 B.C. in Haran in what is now southern Turkey. Abraham began his travels with his family, including his father Terah, from Ur. Ur was a Babylonian city far on the southern end of the Euphrates River which would be in southern Iraq today. Their caravan traveled north from Ur up the Euphrates River valley through Babylon and on northward to Haran. They stopped at Haran for a several years and after Terah had died there, Abraham received his covenant from God. An account of the covenant is in Genesis 12:1-2 Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing. The first thing God did was to send Abraham to Egypt where he loaded him down with wealth and the sent him back to Canaan. So Abraham the Babylonian settled in Canaan and built a wealthy estate for himself. If you know a little bible you will remember that it took Abraham and Sarah a long time to have their son Isaac. Why?

Isaac had two sons Esau and Jacob. Jacob moved from Canaan to Haran and eventually moved back to Canaan with his family. It was on the way back from Haran to Canaan that Jacob wrestled with God and God gave him the name Israel. The line of God's covenant went through the line of Jacob and not Esau. This is where the chosen people of Israel come from and the twelve tribes of Israel are named after ten of Jacobs sons and two of his grandsons. One of his sons, Joseph, wound up in Egypt of course, sold into slavery by his own brothers, and during a time of famine Jacob and his family moved to Egypt because Joseph could provide for them there. But the area of Canaan was the land God promised to Abraham in Genesis 13:14, as an inheritance for his descendents forever.

And so, after years of living in Egypt, when it was time for Moses to bring the descendants of Abraham out of captivity there, they returned to the land that God had promised their forefather Abraham. They went to Canaan in 1406 B.C and entered in to take possession of it at which time Joshua took over for Moses. After their initial conquest of the land of Canaan, the Jewish people entered into a period marked by the leadership of Judges. There were twelve Judges who led Israel from 1375 B.C. to 1050 B.C. They were Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. The period of the Judges was marked by a regular pattern of behavior among the Israelites; the sons of Israel would do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, the Lord would allow one of their neighboring countries to subdue and oppress them, the sons of Israel would cry out to the Lord, and the Lord would show mercy and send a Judge to deliver their enemy into their hand. This pattern repeated itself throughout the three hundred twenty-five year period of the Judges with different neighboring countries being the oppressors during the different Judge's periods.

An interesting side note about some of the neighboring enemies; the Edomites were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, the elder son of Isaac, the Moabites were the descendants of Moab, the son of Abraham's nephew Lot, the Ammonites were the descendants of Ben-Ammi, the son of Abraham's nephew Lot, and the Amalekites were the descendants of Amalek who was the grandson of Jacob's brother Esau. It seems relatives didn't get along any better back then than they do today. Looking at the larger region during this time period, we see the beginning of the rise in power of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians would eventually gain control of the area that used to be the Old Babylonian empire.

Near the end of the period of Judges the sons of Israel again cried out to God and this time they asked for a king and that was the end of the Judges. There were three kings of the united Kingdom of Israel: Saul in 1050 B.C., David in 1010 B.C., and Solomon in 970 B.C. During the reign of the kings, Israel established itself in the region as a semi-major power. Her immediate neighbors were subdued and things were looking good for the future. During Solomon's reign, the temple was built in Jerusalem and opened in 930 B.C.

This period represents the golden years of the Kingdom of Israel, the Lord was glorified, the kingdom prospered, all were united, and no one was oppressing them. Just as everything seemed to be going well, Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and next thing you know the Kingdom of Israel was divided into two kingdoms; Around 925 B.C. the united Kingdom of Israel became two kingdoms; the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. Now the word had gotten out in the larger region that the Kingdom of Israel was a growing power and a force to be reckoned with. So their neighbor's natural reaction when they heard of the split was to test the newly divided kingdoms to see how strong they were.

In the 925 B.C. Egypt made a foray up from the south into the Kingdom of Judah as King Rehoboam had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord and Egypt subdued and oppressed the Kingdom of Judah. It was during this invasion that Solomon's temple and the king's palace in Jerusalem were sacked and the wealth of the Kingdom of Judah was carted off to Egypt. Many people mistakenly believe that the wealth of King Solomon was taken to Babylon since it was Babylon that ultimately destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. but this was not the case. 1 Kings 14:26 tells us that Sheshonq I of Egypt plundered the Kingdom of Judah's wealth but we presume that he left the buildings predominantly intact. About twenty-five years later in 900 B.C. Judah eventually shook off the yoke of the Egyptians under the rule of King Asa, but they never recovered the wealth that was removed to Egypt.

Within the land of the kingdom of Judah a cycle began to repeat itself in much the same way as the cycle from the period of the Judges had played out. There was a royal line of kings who ruled the Kingdom of Judah from the beginning of the split and they were all descendants of the line of King David. There were good kings and there were bad kings and a regular pattern of behavior continued among the kings of the Kingdom of Judah; the King of Judah would do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, the Lord would allow one of their neighboring countries to subdue and oppress them, the next King of Judah would cry out to the Lord, and the Lord would show mercy and deliver their enemy into their hand. The following King of Judah would do what was evil in the sight of the Lord and so on. This basic pattern continued to repeat itself in the Kingdom of Judah. The southern Kingdom of Judah would continue in Jerusalem for another one hundred thirty-six years until the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar II finally destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took the Jewish people into exile in Babylon.

Let's go back to 925 B.C. Immediately in 925 B.C. there were revolts in Syria, Philistia, and Moab against the northern Kingdom of Israel, with each rebelling kingdom securing its independence. Within the land of the northern Kingdom of Israel a different kind of cycle began. All of the kings of the northern kingdom did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Ultimately there were nineteen kings spanning roughly two hundred years and all of them did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. During this period in the northern kingdom God sent prophets to warn the kings and to try and get them to turn from evil. We're talking about prophets like Elijah and Elisha. They performed miracles in the name of the Lord and prophesied to the kings about what the Lord was going to do if they did not turn from their evil ways and still the kings did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. From time to time when the going got tough the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel would cry out to the Lord and he would show mercy. In every case where this happened the kings ultimately went back to their evil ways in the sight of the Lord. In the end God's mercy was overtaken by His justice and they were utterly wiped out. There is an account of it in

2 Kings 17:16-23 They forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. 17Then they made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire, and practiced divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him. 18So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah...Jeroboam drove Israel away from following the Lord and made them commit a great sin. 22The sons of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them 23until the Lord removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day.

I believe that the key verse in this passage is verse seventeen. The northern Kingdom of Israel regularly made God angry by worshipping other gods. But when they began sacrificing their own children to pagan gods, they provoked God. He had reached the limit of his patience with them and would endure no more.

In 722 B.C. the Assyrians crushed the northern Kingdom of Israel in Samaria and sent the majority of the Northern tribes of Israel into exile as slaves. They were sent to a region in the eastern Assyrian Empire in the Zagros Mountains. This area is the mountain range that still runs along the western boarder of northern Iraq just before moving onto the Iranian Plateau. The inhabitants of this region were a loose

group of marauding hoards known as the Umman-Manda. The Assyrians had killed their king and pressed many of them into military service. The northern tribes of Israel were taken into the Zagros Mountains and handed over to these hoards and were never heard from again. It was rumored that the Umman-Manda may have also been cannibals and could well have eaten many of the Israelite slaves. What was left of the women of the northern tribes were taken by the Assyrians who took over the land in Samaria. This is why the Samaritans are so hated by the Jewish people during Jesus time.

Psalm 145:8-10 The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you.

One of the first things that stands out in my mind is that God is incredibly patient and long-suffering. He gave the northern kingdom two hundred years of mercy before destroying them. I find this very comforting because none of us are going to live to be two hundred years old. Notice that during the entire two hundred years God was actively seeking to improve his relationship with his people as he is today. He sent multiple messages of how to proceed through his prophets and he reprimanded his people from time to time so they would turn from their wrong directions and pursue right paths. God is able to orchestrate Kings and nations to bring about his plans for his people and he still makes it happen today.

Romans 9:14-23 What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessings,

Scott