

LIVING THE WORD—Week 8 (Sun., March 15 – Sat., March 21)

The God of the Mighty Acts: the Great Story of God's Relentless Love

The Exile— God Punishes Israel and Returns Them to the Promised Land

Leviticus 26; Nehemiah 9; Ezekiel 20:30-44; Jeremiah 31:31-34

Key Verse: "He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

The story of Israel from the golden calf at Mt. Sinai until they were sent into exile is the story of seven or eight centuries of idolatry and rebellion. Even the wise Solomon, who built the temple of Jehovah in Jerusalem, began to build temples to other gods. As punishment for Solomon's idolatry, most of the kingdom of Israel was taken from his son. Solomon's descendants would only rule over the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Yet the idolatry continued. And with the idolatry, there were all kinds of wickedness, injustice, and oppression of the poor.

For 200 years, every king that followed in the northern kingdom of Israel practiced idolatry until Israel was carried away into exile by the Assyrians. In the southern kingdom of Judah, for over 300 years, only four kings followed in the ways of King David and tried to end idolatry in the land. God's patience finally came to an end and Judah was carried into exile in Babylonia.

More Old Testament books are connected to this mighty act of God than any other. Leviticus and Deuteronomy warn that the exile will come. The histories of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles explain why it happened. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are written about events during the exile and the return from exile. Of the 17 prophetic books, at least 14 warn of the exile or address issues during the return. One Psalm is a bitter lament over the destruction of Jerusalem, and another is a prayer for God to return his people from exile (Psalm 137, 106).

The prophets preached two major themes: judgment and hope. The exile was God's judgment of Israel's rebellion and unfaithfulness, but Israel could hope in God's promise that he would bring them back again to the Promised Land. The language of these prophecies shaped the New Testament teaching about the end times. Another "day of the Lord" is coming when God will judge the wickedness and idolatry in the world. But God's people have hope in the promise that they will be saved from the wrath to come and enjoy life forever with God.

Next Week: Christmas (John 1; Matthew 1; Luke 1-2; Colossians 1:15-23)

Memory Verse (for Weeks 6-8): Deuteronomy 6:4-5

On the Mountain ("*Love God*")—set aside 30 minutes this week for quiet time with God)

1. Find a time when you can sit alone and uninterrupted. Spend a few moments preparing your heart to meditate on your relationship with God.
2. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34 a few times. Meditate for a few moments just on the phrase: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."
3. Have you written Deut. 6:4-5 on your heart? If so, meditate on that command. If not, spend some time committing it to memory.
4. Consider how having this law written on your heart can help keep you from being unfaithful to God this week?
5. Thank God that you know him as your God, and for his forgiveness of your sins.

In the Gathering (“*Love Each Other*”—discuss with your home church or small group)

1. The Israelites worshiped Jehovah, but also worshiped the gods of the nations around them? Why do you think they were always so tempted to worship other gods?
2. In what ways are we also tempted to try to worship God and serve the gods around us?
3. In Ezekiel 16:44-52 God said that the people of Judah were worse than Samaria (the northern kingdom of Israel) and Sodom (of Sodom and Gomorrah infamy). What does he say were the sins of Sodom? Could that be a description of our nation?
4. Ezekiel 20:41-44 says that when God brings Israel back to the Promised Land, it will not be because of what their actions deserve. What reasons are given for God’s actions?
5. If there is time, discuss the “In the World” section below.
6. Do you have anything to share from your time with God, your family, or in the world?
7. Give thanks together for God’s forgiveness and for his promise that because of Jesus we will be saved from the wrath to come and live forever with God.

Around the Table (“*Love Your Family*”—sit at home and talk together as a family)

1. Talk about what it takes for a student to be sent to the principal’s office or given detention, and what it would take to get kicked out of school.
2. Read the story of Israel as told in the prayer of Nehemiah 9. Notice God’s merciful love and patience with his people.
3. What would it take for parents to make a son or daughter they love move out? Would it change their love for their children?
4. How is God’s treatment of Israel like a parent who loves a rebellious son or daughter?

Into the World (“*Love the World*”—prayerfully consider God’s mission for us in his world)

1. In what ways might you be tempted by the sins of Sodom and Israel (Ezekiel 16:44-52)? Pray that you will be faithful to God this week as you live in the world.
2. What could you do this week to be less self-indulgent and more concerned for the poor? What will it look like for you to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?”
3. Pray for our nation that it would turn to God and not face his judgment. Pray that God will use us to help save more people from the wrath to come.