

God's Relentless Pursuit

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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1 Kings 11:1-8 (NRSV)

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, ²from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the Israelites, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods"; Solomon clung to these in love. ³Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. ⁴For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David. ⁵For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. ⁶So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not completely follow the LORD, as his father David had done. ⁷Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. ⁸He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods.

Hosea 2:13-20 (NRSV)

¹³ I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals,
when she offered incense to them
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
and forgot me, says the LORD.

¹⁴ Therefore, I will now allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.

¹⁵ From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of
Egypt.

¹⁶ On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Baal." ¹⁷ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. ¹⁸ I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹ And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. ²⁰ I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

We come to the closing scenes of Act 3. Sadly, the Israelites' faithlessness is demonstrated time and again. Yet, the Lord God, the lover of his people, relentlessly pursues them, unwilling to let them go.

Our story so far

We are looking at the entire biblical story as if it were a six-act play. This week, we are finishing the long and, in the end, tragic story of Act 3.

Act One Act Two Act Three Act Four Act Five Act Six
Creation → Fall → Israel → Jesus → The church → Renewal of creation

When the play opens, God creates everything, including humans in God's image. All is good until the humans rebel against God, seeking to be like gods themselves. This rebellion

The pagan gods

In today's Scripture passages, you'll find references to Baal, Astarte, Milcom, Chemosh, and Molech.

These were all various pagan gods worshipped by the peoples in the lands around the Israelites. Baal, for example, was the chief god of the Canaanites and is encountered often in the story of Israel.

The story of Israel was too often the story of God's people chasing after these false foreign gods and forgetting about the LORD God, the one true God, who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt.

not only destroys the humans' relationship with God but even damages God's creation. Thus ends Acts 1 and 2.

So, at the beginning of Act 3, God launches a project of restoration and renewal, choosing one couple, Abraham and Sarah, through whom this work will proceed. God promises them a land to call their own, descendants more numerous than the stars, and that all the families of the earth will be blessed through them.

Though Sarah is long past her child-bearing years, God gives them a son, Isaac. Isaac's sons are Esau and Jacob. Jacob has twelve sons who become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. When a famine comes upon the land of Canaan, Jacob's sons are driven to Egypt. There they stay and are eventually enslaved by the Egyptians.

God's people are thus in desperate need of rescue. Last week, we saw how God saved his people, through Moses, liberating them from their Egyptian masters and entering into a binding covenant with them.

1000 years of history

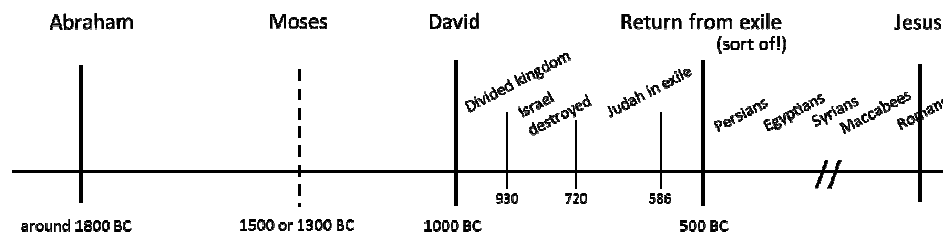
The Old Testament can be very intimidating with all the strange names, places, and just plain weirdness. This week, we'll look at more than a thousand years of Israel's history. This may seem pretty overwhelming, but in the larger sense, the story of Israel is rather simple. So here goes . . .

After Moses' death, Joshua led the Israelites in a war of conquest, occupying much of the land of Canaan. Over a period of a couple of hundred years, the Israelites consolidated their conquests and settled large portions of the Promised Land.¹ During this period, the Israelites were governed by judges; people such as Deborah, Samson, and Samuel who guided Israel under God's kingship. But the book of Judges paints a rather bleak picture of the inability of God's people to live under God's Law. As the last verse of the Book of Judges puts it, everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

God had given his people judges because he did not want Israel to have an earthly king. God himself was to be their king. However, God's people kept demanding a king such as their neighbors had and God finally relented, anointing Israel's first king, Saul.

There were only three kings of a united Israel – Saul, David, and David's son, Solomon. Saul was a disappointment, but David was to become Israel's greatest king, the person whom Israel would always see as the idealized king of Israel.² Solomon ruled at a time when Israel reached the peak of its political power and wealth, enabling Solomon to build the temple which stood for more than 400 years. But Solomon also planted the seeds of Israel's eventual destruction, for he allowed the worship of foreign gods (see today's passage from 1 Kings).

An Old Testament Timeline



After Solomon's death in 922BC, Israel split into two kingdoms. The ten northern tribes formed themselves into a nation called Israel. The two tribes that lived in the south, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, formed themselves into a nation called Judah. The story of

¹ If you have a study bible, the maps in the back will probably help you see what is going on in Israel's history.

² David was king of united Israel in roughly 1000 BC. The timeline on this page will help.

these two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, are told in parallel in the book of Kings (1 and 2).

Beginning with Samuel, God sent prophets to his people during the time of the kings and after. For more than 500 years, these prophets would bring God's word to the people, calling them back to God, pronouncing judgment on them if they did not, and offering words of hope from a gracious and merciful God who would one day put everything right.

David

David is a towering figure in the story of God's people for several reasons. First, the Israelites came to embrace David as their greatest king, the man who consolidated the nation. For example, David conquered the city-state of Jerusalem, which was a neutral location belonging to none of the twelve tribes, and made it his capital. He brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. His son, Solomon, would build God's temple there. Later, Solomon would take Israel to its zenith of military power and wealth, but Solomon also sowed the seeds of Israel's division into two kingdoms.

Second, David was more than just Israel's king. He was its poet, the composer of many psalms. The stories of David, Saul, Jonathan, Bathsheba, Absalom and the rest are the most skillfully drawn narratives in the Old Testament. It is as if the writers and editors of the Hebrew Scriptures devoted their best and most poignant storytelling to the story of David, from his defeat of Goliath to his affair with Bathsheba to the tragedy of his son, Absalom.

But there is another reason that the Israelites and we are so drawn to the figure of David. David may have been Israel's greatest king and he may have been a "man after God's own heart," but David, like us all, made terrible and tragic mistakes. It is a little surprising that the writers of Samuel told the story of David and Bathsheba at all. The book of Chronicles leaves it out. In it we see the story of a powerful man who yielded to temptation, eventually arranging the murder of his pregnant lover's husband. Later, David would fail his own overambitious sons. Such stories reassure us that even David, anointed by God, could make terrible choices against God and others, and yet remain within God's loving, gracious grasp. This is Israel's story in the OT . . . and our story too.

Some prophets worked in Israel (e.g., Elijah), others worked in Judah (e.g., Isaiah). However, despite God's steadfast faithfulness, the people of Israel and Judah would generally insist on going their own way. Of all the kings of Israel and Judah, only a few kings "did what was right in God's eye," as the biblical writers put it. Most of the kings led the people away from God.

When the northern kingdom of Israel was crushed and scattered by the Assyrians in 721BC, God's people saw this as God's judgment on them for their sin. The southern kingdom of Judah held out for about another 150 years, but they too were crushed by an opponent, Babylonia, in 587BC. Jerusalem was sacked. The glorious temple built by Solomon was destroyed and the Ark of the Covenant disappeared for all time. The leaders of Judah were exiled to Babylon.

Though the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538BC, in many respects the exile never ended. Never again would Israel be free, led by a rightful king. By the time of Jesus, the Jews had been trading one oppressor for another, one pretender for another, for more than 500 years! The Jews knew that there was one God, who had created everything, and who had chosen them from among all the peoples of the earth to be the ones through whom God would renew and restore his creation – it just surely didn't look like it! They wondered when they would be vindicated, when all the world would see that the Jews had been right. They prayed for God's kingdom to come!

Knowing the faithful and loving God

Given the vast expanse of the Old Testament, it is understandable that many Christians have trouble finding the God of love in its pages. Yet, if we learn to read the OT better, we find story after story, poem after poem, about a faithful and loving God who pursues his faithless people, who made a promise to them and will not give it up. The story of Hosea is one of my favorites. It is a story about the love of God, from 700 years before Jesus.

The opening verses of Hosea certainly don't read like a love story. God tells Hosea that he is to go find an adulterous woman, marry her, and be a father to her children. Nothing about

Why do Israel and Judah fall?

In the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire posed an ever-growing threat to Israel and Judah. Lying to their northeast, this pressure was most acute on Israel. Nonetheless, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity at times. One of these periods was from about 785BC to 745BC under King Jeroboam. Despite this period of peace and the complacency it brought, after Jeroboam's death the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel, wiping it from the map and exiling tens of thousands of the Israelites. The ten Israelite tribes that made up the northern kingdom would be "lost" forever, never again to be a national entity of any sort. These would be the lost tribes of Israel.

Why would this happen to Israel, and later, to Judah? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria and Babylonia were powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding. For the prophet Amos, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. From Amos 3: "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter.

In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with YHWH, their Lord and God. Such abandonment could lead only one place – to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

For the Jews, exile was essentially a jail sentence for their many sins against God.

affection or courtship -- just go and do it. The only portion of the book that deals with Hosea's personal life is 1:2-10 and 3:1-5. Even here, the Hebrew is ambiguous and scholars are all the over the place on how best translate it. Is the woman, Gomer, a prostitute as some translations have it, or is she "merely" promiscuous? Is she promiscuous before she marries Hosea or only after? But if we keep in mind that we are getting the story of two relationships in parallel, Hosea/Gomer and YHWH/Israelites, then we can get the author's point.

Hosea is to enter into a marriage covenant with a woman who is not faithful to the covenant, committing adultery with other men. Similarly, God has entered into a covenant with the Israelites and they have been unfaithful to that covenant by committing adultery with foreign gods. The way that makes Hosea feel is the way it makes God feel, but Hosea is to be faithful to Gomer as God is faithful to Israel. This may not be Hollywood's idea of a love story, but it is certainly God's.

Yes, the expected anger, judgment, and punishment await the adulterous Israel (2:1-13); adultery has consequences. Yet, that is not the end of the story. We are also told that God will win Israel back by showering her with tender affection (2:14-23): "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her . . . On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'."

The same emotional playing out of betrayal, forgiveness, and restoration is found in chapter 11: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender, I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and no mortal, the Holy one in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (11:8-9).

The over-arching Old Testament story is that of covenant betrayal, judgment, and

restoration. Nearly every OT prophet comes bearing a word from God about the coming destruction of unfaithful Israel, but also brings a word of hope and restoration. The people will have to bear the consequences of their betrayal but God will one day restore them as his people, putting things right for them and for all of creation. It is this restoration (a.k.a.

the coming of the kingdom of God) that the Jews are so anxiously awaiting in Jesus' day. It is the proclamation of God's kingdom, this restoration, which occupied much of Jesus' ministry and was accomplished in his death.

It isn't hard to see that this is somewhat like a marriage between a man and woman that has been rocked by unfaithfulness. It is hard and hurtful, marked by anger and despair. Yet, the couple makes it through, emerging on the other side with a marriage stronger than before. Is this really possible? With God, all things are possible!

True love

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, "Hosea is the prophet of love, but not love as we imagine or fantasize it. He was a parable of God's love for his people lived out as God revealed and enacted it — a lived parable. It is an astonishing story: a prophet commanded to marry a common whore and have children with her. It is an even more astonishing message: God loves us in just this way—goes after us at our worst, keeps after us until he gets us, and makes lovers of men and women who know nothing of real love. Once we absorb this story and the words that flow from it, we will know God far more accurately. And we will be well on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don't love us."

Looking ahead

Next week, we come to Act 4 – the story of Jesus. God made a covenant with his people at Mt. Sinai. Sadly, they weren't able to keep their end of the deal. Now, God steps in and provides a way for the covenant to be kept and usher in the arrival of God's kingdom.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, 2 Samuel 7 God's covenant with King David

Tuesday, 1 Kings 18 During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah confronts the priests of Baal.

Wednesday, Jeremiah 31:31-34 Jeremiah brings the exiles a promise of a new covenant.

Thursday, Isaiah 40:1-11 God announces the end of Jerusalem's suffering.

Friday, Micah 6:6-8 God wants people's hearts, not their sacrifices.

Saturday, Acts 7 Stephen recounts how the story of Israel leads one to Jesus.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Consider for a minute that God is willing to use marriage and faithfulness to that covenant as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people, that is, with us. How is this metaphor helpful in understanding better our collective relationship with God? In living it? In your view, where does the metaphor begin to break down? In the New Testament, the church is sometimes described as the bride of Christ. Is this helpful to you? How?

You might begin by reflecting upon or sharing some stories of times that your own marriage has experienced some rocky times. If you are unmarried, you probably still have experience with difficulties that beset a committed relationship. These don't have to be stories of problems that threatened to blow up the marriage. There are lots of smaller problems that drive wedges and create distance between husbands and wives. How did you get through the tough times? What advice would you give to a couple experiencing problems? How might the story of God's rocky (there's an understatement) relationship with Israel help us with our own marriage problems?

Does it surprise you that in Hosea 11:8-9, written more than 700 years before Jesus, God forswears his wrath? How do you square this with all the biblical (Old and New Testaments alike) depictions of God's wrath, his righteous anger? What might happen if we all forswore our own wrath?

