

## WHAT WAS MISSING?

Presented by

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In the sermon that Blake presented— “19 + 20 = 8?!” — he discussed at great length the sad spiritual condition of the people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah during Old Testament times. Out of a grand total of 39 kings, only 8 could be considered as having been “good” when it came to obeying God and urging their subjects to do likewise. Blake also talked about what eventually happened to those two kingdoms. In 722 B.C. the Northern Kingdom was carried off into Assyrian captivity, and its people were never heard from again. In 586 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon carried the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah into captivity—and only a small remnant of those people was able to return to Jerusalem seventy years later. In short, one kingdom was completely annihilated, and the other was drastically decimated.

The question I want to ask you today is this: **Why did such tremendous tragedies befall God’s people?** Something along the way obviously went **terribly wrong**. After all, it was the Jews of whom Moses rightly remarked, “You are a people holy to the Lord your God who has **chosen you** out of all the peoples on earth to be His people, **His treasured possession**” (Deuteronomy 7:6). Many years later the prophet Samuel asked God in amazement as he pondered the Israelite nation,

“Who is like Your people, like Israel, the one nation on the earth whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people, to make for Himself a name—and **to do for Yourself great and awesome deeds for Your land?** You have made Your people Israel **Your very own people forever**; and You, Lord, have become their God” (2 Samuel 7:23-24).

So how **did** the Jews go from being God’s “chosen people,” His “treasured possession,” and His “people forever”—to being obliterated by the pagan Assyrians or hauled away into seven decades of captivity by the idolatrous Babylonians? What are we missing here?

Truth be told, something is “missing,” all right. But it is not something that **we** are missing. Rather, it was something that **the Israelites** were missing. So what was it? Well, it certainly was not **God’s prosperous blessings!** After all, from the time God brought them out of Egypt and miraculously across the Red Sea, He had showered untold blessings on them. For example, Exodus 16:1-36 tells us that God gave the Israelites manna to eat in the mornings and quail to eat in the evenings. Deuteronomy 29:5 explains that during the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings, their clothes did not even wear out. And, as Deuteronomy 6:11 records, God even gave His people the Promised Land of Canaan containing “houses full of all good things that they did not fill, wells that they did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that they did not plant.” God repeatedly and richly blessed the Israelites—generation after generation.

And it certainly was not **opportunities** that the Israelites were missing. As a result of the generous blessings that God had given the Israelites, most of the then-known world came to know of “the God of the Jews.” As the harlot Rahab said to the two Israelite men who had come to spy out the city of Jericho,

“We know that the Lord has given you the land, that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land are fainthearted because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt.... And as soon as we heard these things, our hearts melted; neither did there remain any more courage in anyone because of you, **for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath**” (Joshua 2:8-11).

It was that very message—“the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth beneath”—that the Jews were supposed to be embodying through their faithfulness to Jehovah. The prophet Isaiah, speaking for God, referred to the Israelites as “My chosen people...the people whom I formed for Myself so **that they might announce My praise**” (Isaiah 43:20-21). The Israelites were supposed to be telling everyone they met about the one, true, living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And they were supposed to be setting a good example everywhere they went so that others would want to love and obey God as well. But what did they do instead? As the prophet Ezekiel wrote on God’s behalf, “They despised My judgments and did not walk in My statutes, but profaned My Sabbaths because their hearts went after their idols” (Ezekiel 20:16). First the Israelites turned to Egyptian calf worship. Then they worshiped the idol Baal of the Sidonians. And as if those two atrocities were not bad enough, the Israelites even worshiped the false god Molech of the Ammonites, and willingly offered their own precious children to him as burnt sacrifices. At practically every turn, the Israelites squandered the golden opportunities that God gave them to do good and “announce His praise.”

It also was not **patience on the part of God** that the Israelites were missing. To begin with, God repeatedly warned them, “If you do not obey Me, but walk contrary to Me, then I also will walk contrary to you in fury; and I will chastise you for your sins” (Leviticus 26:27-28). But then, when the Israelites did fall into sin, God said to them, “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). As the prophet Hosea said to the people of the Northern Kingdom shortly before the Assyrians destroyed them, “Return to the Lord and say to Him, ‘Take away all our iniquity, and receive us graciously.’” Hosea then said on God’s behalf, “I will heal their backsliding, and I will love them freely, for My anger will have turned away from Israel” (Hosea 14:2-4). But, as we all know, Israel did not repent—and was destroyed as a result of her rebellion against God.

So, if it was not God’s blessings that the Israelites were missing, and it was not adequate opportunities that they were missing, and it was not God’s patient, longsuffering nature that they were missing, then **what were the Israelites missing?** I can sum up the answer to that question in a single expressive and powerful word: **commitment!** The Israelites got so wrapped up in their own wants, lusts, and desires

that they became totally self-absorbed. They completely forgot that they had been “created for God’s glory” in order to “announce His praise.” As a result, instead of concentrating on obeying God and carrying out the important tasks He had assigned them, the Israelites focused solely on what **they** wanted. Want proof of that assessment? Consider the following:

First, before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God told them, “When you have crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, **then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their engraved stones, destroy all their molded images, and demolish all their high places; you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land** and dwell in it, for I have given you the land to possess” (Numbers 33:51-53). But, as Judges 1:21-33 makes crystal clear, the Israelites **did not** drive out Canaan’s pagan inhabitants. In fact, as Joshua 14:13 notes, only Caleb “wholly followed the Lord God of Israel” by driving out the inhabitants of the land of Hebron where he and his family chose to live. All of the other Israelites were too focused on themselves to carry out God’s commands to rid the Promised Land of its heathen occupants so that the Israelites could live there and worship their God in peace.

Second, before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God told them, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them” (Exodus 20:5-6). Yet instead of being completely committed to the God Who had brought them out of Egypt and given them the Promised Land as a free gift, what did the Israelites do? They “did evil in the sight of the Lord, forgot the Lord their God, and served the Baals and Asherahs” (Judges 3:7). The Israelites were too focused on themselves to remember to worship the one, true, living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Third, before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God told them, “If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people” (Exodus 19:5). Moses reminded the Israelites,

“The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

While the Lord was faithful to keep His part of the covenant with the Israelites, for their part—as Blake forcefully pointed out—the Israelites thumbed their collective noses at God, intentionally ignored His laws, and purposely broke His commandments. The Jews stubbornly and repeatedly paid no heed to the important role that God should have played in their daily lives. As a result, they fell headlong into spiritual adultery, which took them so far away from God that “the Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel, afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them from His sight” (2 Kings 17:20).

At the beginning of this lesson I asked, “How did the Jews go from being God’s ‘chosen people,’ His ‘treasured possession,’ and His ‘people forever—to being obliterated by the pagan Assyrians or hauled away into seven decades of captivity by the idolatrous Babylonians?” **Now** do you know the answer to that question? The man who was perhaps the most-respected judge and prophet ever to live in Israel—Samuel—once told the Israelites, “If you do not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you” (1 Samuel 21:15). The Israelites ignored Samuel’s warning—and paid for their disobedience with their physical lives, as well as with their immortal souls. What the Israelites lacked was, in a word, **commitment**.

And that brings us to the last question of this sermon: **What about us?** If someone compared **our** lives to those of the **Israelites**, how would **we** measure up? Would we be more like the bulk of the Israelite nation that chose to abandon God and break His laws? Or, would our lives and examples be more comparable to people like, say, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Elijah, Elisha, and other faithful people from the pages of God’s Word? Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” He then added, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

What is it that Jesus is asking of us? In a word, it is: **commitment!** He does not want 90% commitment from us. He does not even want 99% commitment. He will settle for nothing less than **100%!** As God Himself said, “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:5-6). God has no need of “Sunday-morning only” Christians. Without full, complete, total commitment to God, we cannot expect to be the recipients of either His mercy or His salvation. And if we lose out on **those two spiritual blessings**, then it will be **we** who have missed something—just like the Israelites of old did. How sad would **that** be—to follow in the footsteps of those who were completely uncommitted to God, and who ended up losing their souls as a result?