

Yahweh *and* Israel: Fulfillment Beyond Failure



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 3:6–14; 6:6–8; Josh. 24:1–18; Jer. 5:19, 22; Ezek. 16:26–29, 34; Hosea 9:1; John 20:21; Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 1:6; 1 John 2:12.*

Memory Text: “ ‘For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth’ ” (*Isaiah 54:5, NIV*).

Hosea, the last prophet to the northern kingdom, Israel, employed the metaphor of marriage to illustrate the relationship between Yahweh and His people. His tragic personal life intertwined with his prophetic ministry. He took back his unfaithful wife to show that Yahweh was prepared to take His wayward people back.

A hundred years later Jeremiah, the last prophet before the Babylonian captivity, tried to prevent Judah from a similar fate. The people of Judah should have learned a lesson from their sister, Israel, but did not.

Ezekiel, at the same time, ministered to the captives in Babylon. Both prophets borrowed the marriage metaphor for Judah. Jeremiah himself never married. God instructed him not to marry or to enter a house for a feast because the sounds of gladness and of marriage were coming to an end (*Jer. 16:2–4, 8, 9*). Ezekiel's wife was taken away suddenly as a sign that the temple was about to be destroyed (*Ezek. 24:15–21*).

The Week at a Glance: Despite His people's unfaithfulness, the Lord was willing to give them another chance.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 29.*

The Beginning of the Relationship

“ ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord’ ” (Jer. 2:2, 3, NIV).

Yahweh identified Himself to Moses and declared that He was about to fulfill His promises to Israel (*Exod. 3:6–14, 6:6–8*). God promised to make them His own people and to give them a land of their own to dwell in.

The prophets considered the time of the journey through the desert like a honeymoon period, a time they were loyal to Yahweh and did not follow other gods. The Israelites experienced a great deliverance in the Exodus, and that event could be likened to the inauguration of the “marriage” promises.

How did Joshua understand what the Lord, through upholding His end of the covenant, had done and would do for Israel? See *Joshua 24*.

vss. 3, 4

vss. 5–7

vss. 8–12

vs. 13

What were the things the Israelites needed to do in return? See *Josh. 24:14–18*.

If you read the words of the Israelites as expressed in the above texts, you can't help coming away with the fervor and sincerity of their expression. God forbid that we should serve any other gods! After all, look at what He has done for us!

How often have you made a vow to the Lord, in all sincerity and fervor at the time, only to violate it later? What can you do to better ensure that you will remain faithful to the things you've promised to the Lord?

Unfaithfulness of the Bride

The reigns of David and Solomon were characterized by general loyalty to Yahweh. But to prevent his subjects from journeying south to the temple and there getting tempted to defect to Judah, Jeroboam, the first king of Israel in the north, constructed golden calves at Dan and Bethel (*1 Kings 12:28–30*). Since he appointed his own priests, the Levites from all the districts of Israel migrated to Judah (*2 Chron. 11:13–16*). Later kings who led Israel to follow other gods were likened to Jeroboam I (*1 Kings 16:7, 26*).

The prophets condemned Israel and Judah for exchanging God’s glory for worthless idols (*Hos. 4:7, Jer. 2:11*) and for resorting to seeking help from other nations, instead of relying on Yahweh (*Jer. 2:18*). This abandoning of trust by Judah in Yahweh, Jeremiah charges, is like forgetting her marriage to Yahweh—forgetting her wedding jewelry and ornaments (*vs. 32*).

What graphic image do the prophets use to describe Israel’s and Judah’s unfaithfulness?

Jer. 5:7

Ezek. 16:26–29, 34

Hos. 9:1

At one moment the relationship is described as like a man and woman on their honeymoon; the next thing you know, the bride is depicted as selling herself into whoredom. Even worse, Ezekiel declares that although most prostitutes charged a fee, Judah was prepared to make a payment for providing her own services (*Ezek. 16:34*)!

Imagine a woman having a loving, caring husband, one who offers to give her so much, who does all for her that he possibly can (*Isa. 5:4*), and yet she abandons that relationship for a string of men who want her only for carnal pleasure.

It makes no sense, and that’s because sin makes no sense. Unless we are surrendered daily to God, sin will cause us to do things just as reckless and foolish.

What reckless and stupid things have you seen people do because of sin? How can you protect yourself from allowing sin to do the same thing to you?

Reaping the Fruits of Unfaithfulness

Though the Bible uses the image of an unfaithful woman, men have proved even more likely to be unfaithful to their spouse. Either way, as so often the case, someone commits adultery, thinking to find happiness where they are forbidden to seek it, only to discover misery and suffering instead.

A man left his wife for another woman. Within two years his lover had milked him for every cent he had; she had given him an incurable venereal disease; and, finally, she had left him for another man. Penniless, diseased, and heartbroken, he begged his former wife to take him back. She refused. Amid all this, the man had the audacity to ask, “Why, God, why have You allowed this to happen to me?”

How often the punishment befits the crime. Living in the Land of Promise hinged on the children of Israel’s loyalty to Yahweh. When they forsook Him in favor of other gods, Yahweh was under no obligation to keep protecting them from the armies of other nations. They were left to reap the fruits of their unfaithfulness.

Read Jeremiah 5:19. What important principle is seen here? *See also Gal. 6:7.*

Read Jeremiah 5:22. What is the Lord saying to His people? What principle is He explaining to them? What warning is implied here, as well?

God created us; He knows more about us than we do. And He knows what’s best for us; and because He loves us, He wants what’s best for us. That’s why He commands us to obey Him (*Deut. 10:13*). By following His law, by living in harmony with the principles He has established, we can be protected from so much unnecessary pain and suffering.

What has been your own experience with the protections and safety that come from obedience? What lessons have you been forced to learn the hard way?

Restoration

By allowing Israel and Judah to be taken captive out of the land that had been covenanted to them, God was, in effect, “divorcing” them (*Jer. 3:8*). However, this wasn’t to be the last word. At first Jeremiah declared that the sounds of joy and gladness and the voices of the bride and bridegroom would be silenced (*Jer. 7:34, 16:9, 25:10*). Later he added that the period of silence would be limited, and once more the sound of bride and bridegroom would be heard in the land (*Jer. 33:11*).

Why would the sound be considered the sound of joy, of mirth, of gladness? What message was the Lord giving His people then—and us today? See also *John 20:21, Phil. 4:4, 1 Thess. 1:6, 1 John 2:12*.

What promises did God make to His unfaithful bride? *Jer. 25:11, 29:10, Ezek. 16:60*.

With the threat of punishment the prophets included a ray of hope. When Jeremiah declared that the sounds of joy and gladness and the voices of the bride and bridegroom would be silenced (*Jer. 7:34, 16:9*), he added later that the period of silence would be limited to 70 years (*Jer. 25:11*). Then their oppressors would be overthrown. Hosea spoke of a period for Israel when there would be no pregnancy, no conception (*Hos. 9:11*), but after this would come a time of healing and love (*Hos. 14:4*). So, God’s action is not really punishment, but discipline.

The prophets urged Israel to return to Yahweh, promising that He would be faithful in accepting them back. They were confident that Israel would return, but the restoration of the relationship can rest only on one condition—that God’s people in returning to Him should abandon their idolatrous ways, obey His commands, and rely completely on Yahweh again.

New Covenant Promises

It's bad enough, a woman being unfaithful to her spouse; yet, the imagery used was that of a woman who sold herself into prostitution. How low! And yet, as we have seen, the Lord was still willing to take Israel back, still willing to forgive, still willing to heal the broken relationship. The Lord promised that He would make atonement for all that Israel has done (*Ezek. 16:63*). Not only would He take them back, but He would do even more for them.

Read Jeremiah 31:31–37 (see also *Gal. 3:29; Heb. 8:7–13; 10:16, 17*).
What is the message for ancient Israel, and for us today? What hope, what promises, are found there for us?

Not only would the Lord forgive their sins; He promised to write the law in their hearts, to impress it on their minds (*Jer. 31:33*). This text is the foundation of the gospel, the mystery of grace. This is the new covenant, and it forms the foundation of His promises to all who have given themselves to Jesus in faith and obedience.

We might fall, we might sin, we might make mistakes, but thanks to Jesus—and the fullness of what He has done and is doing for us—God will not forsake us. The plan of salvation, at its heart, offers us all forgiveness; no sin is too great, no sinner too bad, that forgiveness can't be found at the foot of the Cross. This was, in its own context, the message that God gave to ancient Israel; and it is, in our context, that of the light shining from the cross of Calvary, the message that the Lord has for His people today. Even if we have “played the harlot,” our loving and caring husband, the Lord, loves us and wants to take us back. He, though, doesn't force us; instead, He draws us with “bands of love” (*Hos. 11:4*).

Have you played the harlot? Have you spurned God's love? His words to you are, “Come back! I will heal and forgive.” The question now is, What is your response?

Further Study: “The Role of Israel in Old Testament Prophecy,” pp. 25–38, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4.

“Nor were these the only prophecies upon which the exiles had opportunity to base their hope of speedy deliverance. The writings of Jeremiah were within their reach, and in these was plainly set forth the length of time that should elapse before the restoration of Israel from Babylon. ‘When seventy years are accomplished,’ the Lord had foretold through His messenger, ‘I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.’ Jeremiah 25:12. Favor would be shown the remnant of Judah, in answer to fervent prayer. ‘I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.’ Jeremiah 29:14.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 552, 553.

Discussion Questions:

- ① As a class, talk more about the question of how sin causes people to do irrational and reckless things. How is it that people who know better nevertheless allow themselves to be swept away by their passions? What can we do, if anything, to help someone we see heading down that path?
- ② Talk about the idea of God’s law being a protection. What does that mean? How does it protect us? What does it protect us from? At the same time, too, why is faithfulness to the law and to the principles of living that God has given us no guarantee that we will not suffer?
- ③ Wednesday’s lesson talked about the joy, happiness, and peace that come from being in a saving relationship with our Lord. Talk about just what it is about serving the Lord that brings joy, happiness, and peace. Let each member share their own experiences. Seek to learn from each other. Why, in a world full of idols (in whatever form they come), is it important to focus on the blessings and good things that we have been given as children of God?

Summary: Though the Israelites failed Yahweh, we must not judge them. After all, how faithful are we—who have them as an example—to our covenant vows to the Lord?

A Fisherman's Prayer

by A. B. ARLOO

The African country of Ghana has a large and vibrant Adventist presence. But unreached areas remain, such as the Afram Plains of eastern Ghana. This region, with nearly impassible terrain and a harsh climate, is difficult to enter. Until recently most of the 1.6 million people living there had never heard the Adventist message. In 2002 a team of Global Mission pioneers entered the Afram Plains to sow the seed of the gospel. One day the evangelists learned that God had, indeed, gone before them to prepare the soil.

Maxwell Vitashi is an old fisherman in the area. One day he paddled his boat upstream for several miles in search of a good catch. But as he dragged in his nets, his boat suddenly capsized, and he was tossed into the swift-flowing waters.

Maxwell swam toward the nearest shore, but the river was wide, and his strength began to fail. He feared that he would die. Although he was not a Christian, he prayed, "God, save me." Suddenly he felt a powerful force push him to a spot between two tree stumps. He grabbed the stumps and hung on, gasping for breath. He looked around. He was utterly alone. His hands grew numb from the cold water, and he wondered whether he would still die in the river. Again he prayed.

From nowhere a boat appeared. Two men paddled toward Maxwell, lifted him from his perch, and settled him into their boat. They paddled toward the riverbank and carried him to the shore, where they gently laid him on the ground. Maxwell heaved a weary sigh. Then he quickly sat up to thank the men who had saved him. They were gone. He scanned the beach and the river, but he found no sign of the men who had saved him.

Maxwell stumbled into the village, where he told everyone what had happened. "Who were the men?" many asked. But Maxwell did not know. He had lived in this region his entire life and had never seen them before.

Maxwell lost his boat that day, but he rejoices that the God of the universe stepped down to save his life and reveal His presence to a humble fisherman who, until then, did not even know God's name.

When the Global Mission pioneers arrived in his village shortly after Maxwell's experience, the fisherman welcomed them and invited his family and friends to listen and learn about the God who heard his desperate prayers.

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This quarter's study, *The Refiner's Fire* by Gavin Anthony, will delve into why we, as Christians who have committed our lives to Christ, also experience suffering. We know Christ Himself was no stranger to suffering. This study will show us that pain, suffering, and loss do not mean that God has abandoned us. But rather, it will show that God gives us meaning and purpose in these difficult times, and, above all, we can trust Him.

Lesson 1—The Shepherd's Crucible

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: A Guide for the Journey: The Shepherd (*Ps. 23:1*)

MONDAY: Locations on the Journey (*Ps. 23:3, NRSV*)

TUESDAY: Unexpected Detour 1: The Valley (*Ps. 23:4, NKJV*)

WEDNESDAY: Unexpected Detour 2: The Surrounded Table (*Ps. 23:5, NKJV*)

THURSDAY: A Certain Promise for the Journey (*Ps. 23:6, NKJV*)

Memory Text—*Psalms 23:3*

Sabbath Gem: At times we feel we have been treated unfairly, betrayed, or led into the valley of death as described in our memory text. But God clearly promises to us that He will restore us and use these painful experiences to train us in righteousness.

Lesson 2—The Crucibles That Come

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: Surprises (*1 Pet. 4:12, NIV*)

MONDAY: Crucibles of Satan (*1 Pet. 5:8, NKJV*)

TUESDAY: Crucibles of Sin (*Rom. 1:8, NKJV*)

WEDNESDAY: Crucibles of Purification (*Jer. 9:7, NKJV*)

THURSDAY: Crucibles of Maturity (*2 Cor. 12:7, NKJV*)

Memory Text—*1 Peter 4:12, 13, NIV*

Sabbath Gem: God often allows us to experience difficult circumstances that cause our characters to change, develop, and grow. We need to begin to recognize how God works in our lives to better understand what our response should be.

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