

Chapter 15—A Call to Repentance and Renewal

God's Promises

Does God keep His promises to a chosen nation as well as to chosen individuals who have been called out to meet Him in the wilderness of this present age? Our destiny depends on the answer to this question!

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: “Now I will bring back the captives of Jacob, and have mercy on **the whole house of Israel** [all 12 tribes including Joseph, cf. Ezekiel 47:13-14]; and I will be jealous for My holy name—after they have borne their shame, and all their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, when they dwelt safely in their *own* land and no one made *them* afraid.

When I have brought them back from the peoples and gathered them out of their enemies' lands, and I am hallowed in them in the sight of many nations, then they shall know that I *am* the LORD their God, who sent them into captivity among the nations, but also brought them back to their *own* land, and left none of them captive any longer. **And I will not hide My face from them anymore; for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel,**” says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 39:25-29, NKJV).

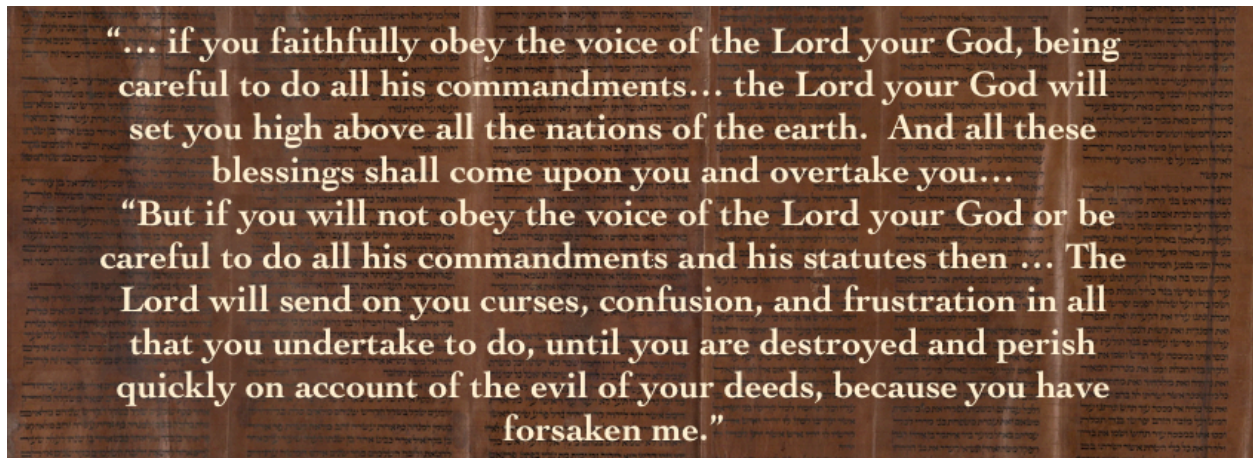
Today's superpower, the United States of America, boldly proclaims on its money, “In God We Trust!” Here in Canada we also express similar sentiments in our constitutional documents and public institutions. But somehow such public acknowledgments of the Almighty seem to ring hollow at the turn of the millennium. While we have never been more prosperous, there are dark undercurrents in our commonwealth that are profoundly unsettling.

There is a clearly widening chasm between what our leaders might affirm publicly to appeal to their audience and what many of us do privately. As a people we seem to be more interested in looking good than doing good. If we really did trust in God and lived by His standards of personal behavior would there be some two million Americans locked up in jail? Would the Canadian legal system be debating the removal of the Bible from its courts (because it seems irrelevant to certain people in our modern multicultural, secular society) when admonishing witnesses to tell the truth, the whole truth?

The Judeo-Christian ethic, those biblical standards of morality, are no longer our guiding light in society. It was only one life-time ago that today's news headlines would have shocked the sensibilities of the average modern-day descendant of ancient Israel. Yet now, we see regularly news reports about the biomedical harvest and commercial trafficking of “fetal tissue” and the response from many is barely a yawn? Some people may wring their hands about drug abuse, but the news touts as the best solution the government's proposal to step in and provide a ‘safe supply’ to meet an insatiable demand for psycho-active drugs. It would seem that only the few are concerned about the push for unrestrained sexual expression, and the gender-identity politics that is accelerating the disintegration of families. In a few decades the values of western society have undergone an overwhelming transformation. No longer can we take for granted those values that have been a part of our ethos for centuries: the rule of law, freedom of conscience, and sanctity of life. To our great shame, our leaders have led us down dark paths and our nations have rejected their foundational documents — those constitutions and charters that had their roots embedded deeply in the scriptures and biblical morality.

The nations founded by the descendants of the nomadic Israelite tribes, who established themselves in Northwestern Europe during the Age of Migration, are all experiencing these same heart-breaking social conditions! Social scientists now label much of Northwestern Europe as “post-Christian.” And even in the New World where religious affiliation remains stronger, we North Americans are hypocritical when it comes to our personal behavior. We say but do not do. We preach but don’t practice. We profess belief, but do we have faith? Is this a surprising state of affairs? Not really. After all, weren’t our ancestors exiled from their original heritage for similar attitudes and behavior? It would seem that we are just doing what comes naturally.

One lesson a reader should discern from the history of the Israelite tribes while living in their original Promised Land is this: Any people whose ancestors entered into a kinship relationship by covenant with the God of the Bible would eventually receive the fulfillment of the divine promises made to them. However, these promises are conditioned by every generation’s behavior. Promised blessings flow from living within the covenant, while promised curses come from transgressing it (cf. Deuteronomy 28; Leviticus 26).



Blessings and Curses – Deuteronomy 28

Faithful attention to the values approved by the Bible’s God produces happiness, security, health, wealth, abundance, and power for both individuals and nations. The start of King Solomon’s reign, during the first golden era of Israel’s united monarchy, was a testimony to the material blessings provided by God. However—disobedient, idolatrous, and hypocritical behavior inevitably reaps tragic consequences such as economic hardship, political instability, premature death, war, and exile. That, too, was the preserved history of both the northern Ten Tribes of the house of Israel and the southern house of Judah.

This lesson about cause and effect, behavior and consequence, is tremendously important. Nevertheless, there is a second lesson that may also be discerned from this history. This second lesson is perhaps even more important for us today because it gives us a reason for hope in spite of the current spiritual realities found in our dystopian Western world.

Hesed—God’s Covenantal Grace

Many religious people believe the story of ancient Israel is of little consequence today and that the Hebrew Scriptures have no relevance to their lives. This belief is based on the assumption that the “Old” Covenant has been abolished or done away. This perspective was addressed in chapter one, “Was the ‘Old’ Covenant Abrogated?” According to the testimony of the Greek, New Covenant Scriptures this doctrinal position is false. Abraham’s physical descendants still have a valid covenant relationship with the eternally living One!

Some, however, might still say, “Hey, didn’t one of the OT prophets say that God ‘divorced’ ancient Israel because of their backsliding, and would have nothing further to do with them?” Let’s take a look at this issue and examine what is really stated by the Scriptures.

If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not such a land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me? says the LORD.... Have you not just now called to me, “My Father, you are the friend of my youth—will he be angry forever, will he be indignant to the end?” This is how you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.

The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill... and played the whore there? And I thought, “After she has done all this she will return to me”; but she did not return, and her false sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce... Yet for all this her false sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but only in pretence, says the LORD (Jer. 3:1-10 NRSV).

Do these verses really say that an angry God actually divorced Israel and forever ruptured His covenant with them? Or was God using a literary figure of speech in this passage to express an easily understood concept, so that His prodigal children might really see themselves for what they were, spiritual whores! And if so, would they change their behavior?

What was the God of Israel’s real intent in using such word pictures? Let’s read on to see.



The Lord’s Mercy — Jeremiah 3

Then the LORD said to me: Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah. Go, and proclaim these words toward *the north* [notice the geographic location], and say:

Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD; I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt....

Return, O faithless children, says the LORD, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion [note the clear reference to prescriptions for the renewal of the covenant with Israel after punishment for sin, cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-4; Ezekiel 36:16-25].

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding [another prophetic reference to covenantal renewal, cf. Ezekiel 34:11-16, 23-24, and footnote¹].

And when you have multiplied and increased in the land [another clear reference to a physical blessing resulting from Israel's covenantal renewal, cf. Deuteronomy 30:5, 28:4] in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, "The ark of the covenant of the LORD." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.

At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, **and all nations shall gather to it**, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem [cf. Revelation 21:3], and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will (Jeremiah 3:11-17, NRSV).

The Lord's instructions to Israel were for his children to repent and return to Him. Israel's divine covenant partner is merciful. The Hebrew word for "merciful" is "hasid" which also means "one who is kind or pious."² It refers to the community obligation found in a close relationship among family, friends, or a master and his servant. *Hasid* comes from the three letter Hebrew root word *hesed*, and this word is intimately connected and used with the Hebrew word for covenant. *Hesed* also means "lasting loyalty," "lovingkindness," or "faithfulness." The Bible uses it, for example, to show the type of relationship between a dying father and his dearest son (Genesis 47:29) or the closest of friends (1 Samuel 20:1-8 and 2 Samuel 9:1). When the LORD God showed His glory to Moses and proclaimed His holy name (Exodus 34:6), one of the character traits that He revealed of His nature was that of being *rab hesed*, rich or full of "faithfulness, kindness, grace."³ Thus *hesed* is the loving covenantal loyalty God has with his children.

¹ Note Ezekiel 34:25-31 clearly points to a covenant restoration using language that parallels Israel's original covenant language as written in Leviticus 26:4-6: "I will make with them **a covenant of peace...** I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the insults of the nations. **They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the LORD God.** You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God."

² Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1996, Strong's number 2623, p.339.

³ William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, 1971, p. 111.

Jeremiah's message is clear, the LORD will continue to offer kindness, mercy, and grace. And to what purpose? So that His covenant relationship with Israel may be fully restored in order to achieve His original objective for His firstborn and the whole world. The prophet Ezekiel quoted God to this same effect:

“I will renew my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. I will forgive all the wrongs you have done, but you will remember them and be too ashamed to open your mouth.” The Sovereign LORD has spoken (Ezekiel 16:62-63, Good News Bible).

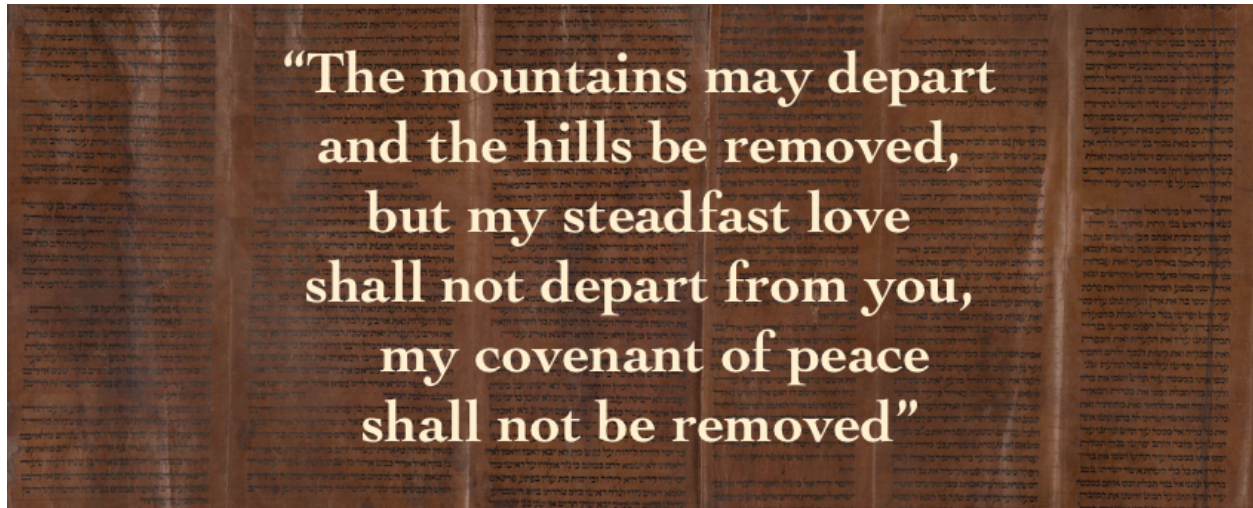
The LORD's covenant in reality is a familial relationship with Israel. It is one of a Father with his children (cf. Psalm 89:26; Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 9:6, 63:16 and 64:8; Malachi 2:10).

Yet the prophet Jeremiah used a gripping literary word picture (Jeremiah 3:8) to paint Israel as an adulterous wife being sent away by her outraged divine husband with a decree of divorce in her hand. Jeremiah wanted to fire up his readers' emotions and grab their attention. It was a dramatic teaching tool, a splendidly colourful analogy or metaphor. But it would be incorrect to base a major theological doctrine merely on a writer's literary device. Israel was God's firstborn by covenant, not His bride (Exodus 4:22, Deuteronomy 32:6). There was no marriage. The Scriptures also make it abundantly clear there was no actual divorce. The covenant was not abrogated.

Thus says the LORD: Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? (Isaiah 50:1, NRSV).

As the Society of Biblical Literature dryly points out in their notes on this verse:

There is no *bill of divorce* to mark God's putting away of Israel as irrevocable, nor did God have to sell his people to pay off a *creditor*; Israel's suffering was not due to God's weakness, but to Israel's sin.⁴



The Lord Keeps Covenant Loyalty — Isaiah 54

⁴ *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, 1993, p. 1085.

Far from breaking His covenant with Israel, God promises to make it work! He will deal faithfully and mercifully with His children who have behaved as spiritual whores. Though He promises them a taste of their own medicine and the natural consequences of their disloyalty, yet in the end, He will nurture his children again when they see the folly of their wrong choices.

Yes, thus says the Lord God: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, breaking the covenant; yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant (Ezekiel 16:59-60, NRSV).

As any wise parent, God is a believer in tough love. He disciplines every son and daughter whom He chooses to make His kin by covenant, so that all may learn to be holy as He is holy (cf. Leviticus 11:45). Yet the Lord is merciful. He always forgives when we acknowledge our sins and change our ways.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth... For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you....So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, **but my steadfast love [Heb. *hesed*] shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you** (Isaiah 54:4-7, 9-10, NRSV).



**“For I am the Lord [your Father and King by covenant] who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”
Leviticus 11**

The Lord God’s intentions for his covenantal partners have been consistent throughout history. The Lord wanted Abraham, his friend, to walk with him and be perfected, become holy. Through Moses, the Lord made it clear that he wanted the nation, his sons and daughters, to walk with him and become holy, dedicated to God and his ways. And through the prophets the Lord offered forgiveness, a way to restore the covenant relationship that they had forsaken in their exile and wanderings. The Lord would again save and shepherd his covenant people. Once again he will call them to embrace holiness and walk in the footsteps of their father Abraham, and they will eventually hear and answer the Lord’s call and be refashioned to fulfill their purpose.

The Misunderstood Priestly Prophet

When we consider God’s words of instruction to the Tribes perhaps one of the most misunderstood and overlooked prophetic books of the Bible is that of Ezekiel. Commonly believed to have been written during a time span that covered about twenty years, from 593 to 571 BCE, the author was a member of the Hebrews’ priestly tribe of Levites, a descendant of Aaron of the Zadok line. Ezekiel was taken captive by the Babylonians and exiled to Mesopotamia during the events that led eventually to the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and its capital city Jerusalem in 587 BCE.



Ezekiel Exiled in Babylon — Messages for Judah and Israel

One of the most surprising things about Ezekiel is that he was sent to prophesy not just to the Jews, the house of Judah, but also to the rebellious house of Israel, the northern Ten Tribes! Some have difficulty in sorting out who the prophet is addressing in different passages. For example, the English phrase “house of Israel” is sometimes used in a broad, inclusive sense as referring to all the descendants of the patriarch Israel (Jacob) as in Ezekiel 12:9-12 and 24:21. These verses primarily refer to contemporaneous events taking place in the southern kingdom of Judah—among the Jews.

However, the phrase “house of Israel” in Ezekiel 4:4-6, 9:9 and 25:3 is used in a narrow sense. In such cases it refers specifically to the northern Ten Tribes of Israel and not to the southern “house of Judah.” While both the northern tribal confederation and southern tribal confederation were all the children of Israel (Jacob), they had for political reasons split after the death of Solomon. Subsequently these two tribal groupings had developed distinct, separate political identities that more frequently clashed than cooperated, even though they were blood brothers (cf. 1 Kings 12:1-24, 15:16, 22:1-4; 2 Chronicles 25:17-24, 28:5-15).



Tribal Lands – Joshua 13-21

Ezekiel addressed the continuing problem of sibling rivalry between the two groups of the children of Jacob. It seems that some in Judah wanted to lay claim to *all* the Promised Land, including the inheritance traditionally apportioned to the northern house of Israel. A valid claim to any land inheritance in the Promised Land is dependent upon being part of the LORD’s kinship covenant.

Those Jews sought to use human reasoning concerning the northern Ten Tribes’ then-apostate condition to suggest that Judah was entitled to their brothers’ land, since from all appearances the Ten Tribes seemed to be wholly alienated from the covenant (cf. Genesis 15:17-21).

But, such an irreversible, tragic end and breach of promise was definitely not according to God’s master plan (cf. Ezekiel 47:13-14)! Listen to His judgment in the matter.

Son of man, your brothers, the redemption-men, your brothers and **all the house of Israel** that have heard the inhabitants of Jerusalem [house of Judah] saying to all of them, **“Go far away from Jehovah: this land is given to us for a possession.”**

Because of this say, “So says the Lord Jehovah: Though I have sent them far off among the nations [“Nations” is plural. The Jews then being exiled from Judah were being sent as slaves to Babylon—not many other distant lands like the Scythians who were scattered across the Eurasian steppes into central Europe.] and though I scattered them among the lands; **yet I was to them as a little sanctuary in the countries there where they had gone**” [God kept track of them and preserved them].

Therefore say: “So says the Lord Jehovah: **I shall gather you** [the Ten Tribes] **from the peoples, and assemble you out of the lands, in those where you were scattered; and I shall give to you the land of Israel** [their allotted inheritance, cf. Joshua 13-21, Ezekiel 48]. And they will come there, and they will remove all its hateful things and all its abominations from it. And I shall give to them one heart, and **I will put a new spirit within you. And I will remove the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh, so that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments, and do them. And they shall be to Me for a people, and I will be to them for God**” (Ezekiel 11:15-20, The Interlinear Bible).

The complete fulfillment of these events are yet future. Yet Ezekiel began prophesying only some 10 to 20 years after the Israelite-Scythians had pulled back from their conquest of Western Asia (see chapter 4). Ezekiel’s message was a potent one for both the Ten Tribes and the house of Judah of his day, yet the greater fulfillment is still to be realized. Of course, land grabbing wasn’t just a weakness for Judah. One of the children of Jacob’s neighbours and descendants of Esau, called Mount Seir or Edom, also sought to seize the Promised Land for themselves:

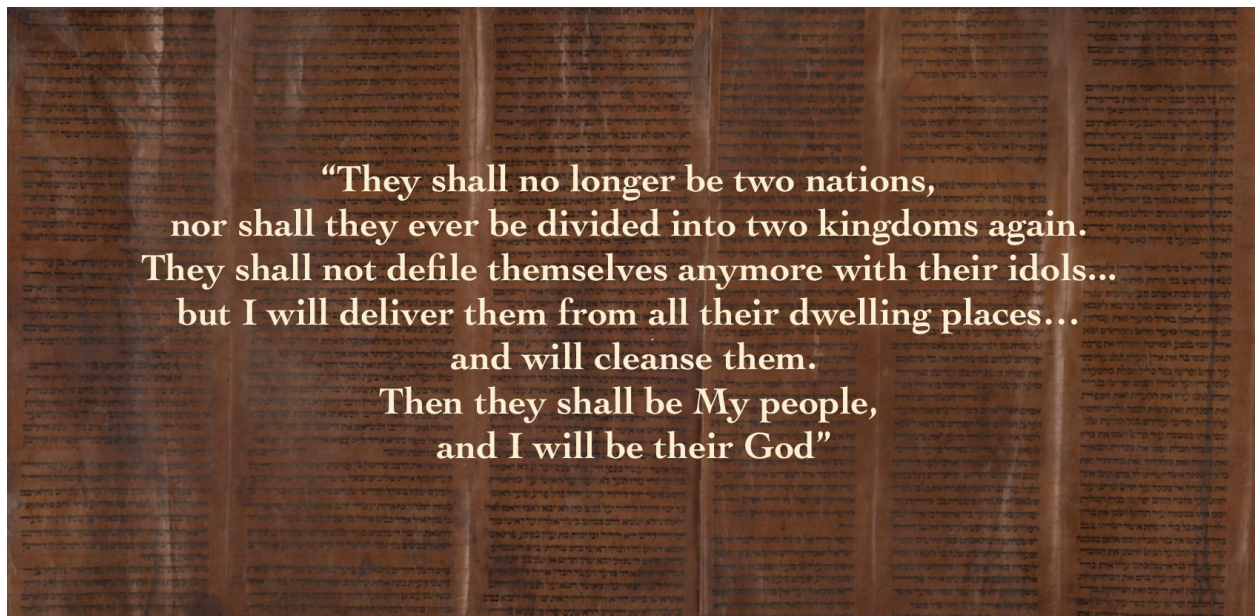
Because you [Edom] said, **“These two nations and these two countries [Israel and Judah] shall be mine, and we will take possession of them”**—although the LORD was there—therefore, as I live, says the Lord God, I will deal with you according to the anger and envy that you showed because of your hatred against them; and I will make myself known among you, when I judge you (Ezekiel 35:10-12, NRSV).

The division into northern and southern groupings of Jacob’s children was prophesied by Ezekiel to be only a temporary phenomenon. In the context of future events, Ezekiel prophesied that these two distinct groups of covenant people would be reunited:

Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “As for you, son of man, take a stick for yourself and write on it: “For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions.” Then take another stick and write on it, “For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions.” Then join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand....

“Surely I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will join them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick and they will be one in My hand....”

“They shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols... but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God” (Ezekiel 37:16-17, 19, 22-23, NKJV).



A Prophecy of the United Tribes of Israel and Judah — Ezekiel 37

All People Included in the Prophets' Good News

Of course, Ezekiel wasn't the only prophet to give such an astonishing message of return and restoration. Zechariah also wrote of a future ingathering of the "house of Judah" and the "house of Joseph" after a time of national disaster (cf. Zechariah 10:6-12). Isaiah the prophet, who wrote at the time of the destruction of the northern Ten Tribes' political state by the Assyrians, made similar statements. He asserted that after national devastation and collapse the outcasts of Israel—from both Judah and Ephraim—would return to the Promised Land. The antagonism that had existed between the two groups of brothers would disappear. These events have not yet occurred but are clearly prophesied for the future (cf. Isaiah 11:11-16).



God Rescues & Restores All Who Trust Him

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/babylonian-exile.jpg>

Concurrent with the Israelite tribes return to the Promised Land and the renewing of their kinship covenant with God, the prophets foresaw the participation and inclusion of many other ethnic groups. This is a profound paradigm shift, which some people may find difficult to grasp. Yet what the prophets heralded, besides Israel's own restoration, was the multi-ethnic embrace of the Creator God's covenant. This remarkable relationship originally established by God with Abraham was intended from its origin to include eventually all humanity (cf. Galatians 3:14). Many people would perhaps be surprised at some of the specific features of the universal relationship between God and humanity that distinctly recall God's relationship with Israel:

"Be just and fair to all," say the LORD. "Do what is right and good, for I am coming soon to rescue you. Blessed are those who are careful to do this. Blessed are those who honor my Sabbath days of rest by refusing to work. And blessed are those who keep themselves from doing wrong.

And my blessings are for Gentiles, too, when they commit themselves to the LORD. Do not let them think that I consider them second-class citizens.... **I will bless the Gentiles who commit themselves to the LORD and serve him and love his name, who worship him and do not desecrate the Sabbath day of rest, and who have accepted his covenant.** I will bring them also to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations. **For the Sovereign LORD, who brings back the outcasts of Israel, says: "I will bring others, too, besides my people Israel!"** (Isaiah 56:1-3, 6-8, NLT).

Ezekiel quotes God as exhorting not only Israelites, but also the non-Israelite residents living among them to remain faithful to Him—or else (cf. Ezekiel 14:6-8)! It would appear that from the divine perspective we are accountable for what we know regardless of our ethnic background. The Lord of Hosts is not a respecter of persons. He is fair and just. He treats all with equity and love. From the beginning God had instructed Israel to love the foreigner, the stranger, and allow them to immigrate. But, the foreigners welcomed into the nation, were also expected to live in accordance to the stipulations of the covenant, and love God and his laws.

Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a **stranger**, because you were **strangers** in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9)

The **stranger** who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were **strangers** in the land of Egypt: I *am* the Lord your God. (Leviticus 19:34)

You shall have the same law for the **stranger** and for one from your own country; for I *am* the Lord your God.(Leviticus 24:22)

When the Messianic kingdom is established there will be one God, one faith, one lifestyle:

Thus says the Lord GOD: “No foreigner, **uncircumcised in heart or uncircumcised in flesh**, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who is among the children of Israel (Ezekiel 44:9).

From God’s perspective the problem with the ancient Israelites was not that they ceased to practice circumcision, but that they were “uncircumcised in heart” (Jeremiah 9:25-26). The millennial solution to this spiritual problem will be to require both the spiritual and physical circumcision of all who desire to enter the future Temple as envisaged by Ezekiel. But the circumcision of the heart can only be done through the working of God’s spirit. God, of course, has promised to provide this spiritual blessing for all people (cf. Ezekiel 39:29; Jeremiah 31:31-37; Acts 10:34-44) just as He has promised to provide for the stranger a physical heritage and equal standing among His people Israel:

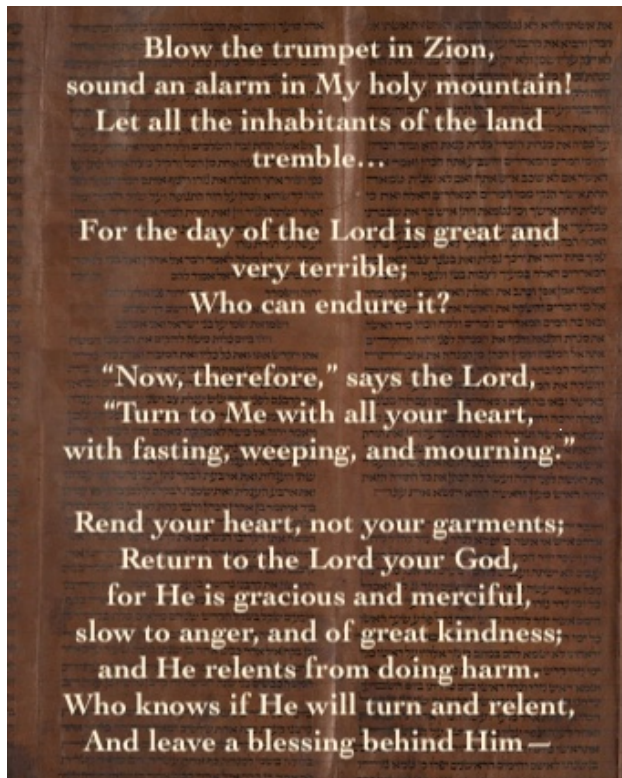
So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. **They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God** (Ezekiel 47:21-23, NRSV).



God’s Plan for Israelite and Foreigner — Isaiah 45

For Those Who Have Ears to Hear, A Word of Warning

For a book written during a time of great turmoil and unimaginable suffering, Ezekiel is remarkably full of hope. But it is also mysterious, and at times frightening! This prophet writes of extraordinary, close encounters with Israel's unearthly LORD God. The messages from this emotive, mysterious Being just don't fit comfortably with many of today's stereotyped images of a politically correct, warm'n'fuzzy, complacent, Grandpa sort of God, who pats us on our heads while vacuously mumbling a few words about being nice. This is the impotent God envisioned by the modern Christian or pseudo-Christian perspective — Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.



God of Justice and Mercy — Joel 2

for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? (Hebrews 12:5-9, NRSV).

Such tough love is for the purpose of eliminating self-destructive behavior and to effect a change of heart. It is tempered by the good news of *hesed*, merciful grace and faithfulness, so that His children would experience spiritual growth while receiving divine correction.

In dramatic contrast with today's strange mental images of a soft, relativistic, wishy-washy deity, Ezekiel's LORD of Hosts doesn't hesitate to act like a U.S. Marine drill sergeant and get right in the face of his rebellious children *and* their too often hateful non-Israelite neighbors when the situation calls for it (cf. Ezekiel chapters 25-32).

This God, unknown to many of us moderns, expects us all to know better and to do better. And He says so with no ifs, ands, or buts. Accordingly, the Bible's God does make judgments and He does punish. Where natural consequences fail to create an impetus to change—or would be too destructive—God acts to inflict logical consequences of His making. But He doesn't impulsively lash out in anger because He hates us or lacks self-control. God is a loving Father who treats us as His children:

"My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts."⁵ Endure trials

⁵ Proverbs 3:11-12, quoted in the Book of Hebrews from the Septuagint translation.

Yes, Ezekiel dwells at length on promises of unmerited covenantal grace, comfort, and restoration. But, the prophet also takes ample pains to warn us of the inevitable consequences of embracing evil. Ezekiel graphically explains that when the sins of the people become greater than the Lord can bear—watch out! Vengeance belongs to God!

Therefore thus says the Lord God: “Because you have multiplied disobedience more than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in My statutes, nor kept My judgments, nor even done according to the judgments of the nations that are all around you;” therefore thus says the Lord God: **“Indeed I, even I, am against you and will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. I will do among you what I have never done, and the like of which I will never do again, because of all your abominations.** Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst [due to severe hunger], and sons shall eat their fathers; and I will execute judgments among you, and all of you who remain I will scatter to all the winds.

“Therefore, as I live,” says the Lord God.... “My eye will not spare, nor will I have any pity. One third of you shall die of the pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst; and one-third shall fall by the sword all around you; and I will scatter another third to all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them. **Thus shall My anger be spent, and I will cause My fury to rest upon them, and I will be avenged; and they shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it in My zeal, when I have spent My fury upon them**” (Ezekiel 5:7-10, 1213, NKJV).

What is it that upsets God? He is angry because His own children, His kin by covenant, refuse to acknowledge Him as their Father. They deny by their actions that they are His people. The house of Israel wanted to act just like the nations who knew nothing of God and His way of life. This denial of their covenant identity by the house of Israel was specifically manifested by their repudiation of what God calls “My Sabbaths, My statutes, My judgments” (cf. Ezekiel 20:12-24; 2 Kings 17:15-17).

God called His Sabbaths “a sign between them and Me that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them” (Ezekiel 20:12). These Sabbaths, statutes, and judgments as described in the first five books of the Bible (the Torah) were considered by God to be elements essential to the covenant and the establishment of a holy, righteous nation. They were to be His people’s trademark by which not only God, but also the whole world, would recognize them.



Exodus 34 — Deuteronomy 30
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But the house of Israel refused to practice this distinctive divine lifestyle. They wanted to behave like all the other nations of the world who had not promised by covenant to follow God. So the Lord gave them up, temporarily, to reap the natural consequences of their own bad behavior. This was self-inflicted punishment, reaping what one sows (cf. Galatians 6:7-9). One of the most notable of these tragic, ungodly practices adopted by the house of Israel in their idolatrous lifestyle was infanticide, the killing of their own babies (cf. Ezekiel 20:26, 31; 2 Kings 17:17).

By His prophets, God also warned His rebellious people to change their ways (2 Kings 17:13-14). But they wouldn't listen. So, after many delays and much patience, God took action to exile His stiff-necked, arrogant people (2 Kings 17:18). Yet such punishment is not the end of the story. The LORD promises in the future to intervene and straighten out His rebellious covenant people. At some point He will not allow the *status quo* to continue. God makes these specific promises about what He is going to do with the house of Israel:

What you have in your mind shall never be, when you say, “We will be like the Gentiles, like the families in other countries, serving [idolatry].” “As I live,” says the Lord GOD, “surely with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out, I will rule over you.

“I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will plead My case with you face to face. Just as I pleaded My case with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will plead My case with you,” says the Lord GOD.

“I will make you pass under the rod [like a shepherd who sorts out his flock, cf. Matthew 25:31-46], and **I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; I will purge the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against Me;** I will bring them out of the country where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

“As for you, O house of Israel,” thus says the Lord GOD: “Go, serve every one of you his idols—and hereafter —if you will not obey me; but profane My holy name no more with your gifts and your idols. For on My holy mountain, on the mountain height of Israel,” says the Lord GOD, “**there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall serve Me; there I will accept them,** and there I will require your offerings and the firstfruits... together will all your holy things... **And I will be hallowed in you before the Gentiles.**”

“Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, into the country for which I lifted My hand in an oath to give to your fathers.... **Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have dealt with you for My name’s sake, not according to your wicked ways nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel,**” says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 20:32-41, 44, NKJV).

But despite such no nonsense talk, Ezekiel doesn't merely shout epithets or declare that our lives are about to get hard and then we die. Ezekiel paints an equally convincing picture of a God who prefers to reason with us, his people, because He loves us (cf. Ezekiel 18:1-22). Ezekiel's God doesn't rejoice at anyone's death (cf. Ezekiel 18:23, 31-32; 33:10-20; 2 Peter 3:9). Rather the Lord God wants to save his people from themselves so they will stop doing the things He hates that will destroy them. He wants us to honour His covenant by beginning to do the things that please Him (cf. Ezekiel 20:10-20; 1 John 3:4-8). He wants us to return to Him so that He can spare us from a dramatic crash and burn ending (cf. Ezekiel 7; 2 Peter 3:10-12; Revelation 21:8). God would much prefer to give us an abundant life (cf. John 10:10).

Consider Solomon's Prayer

With the Lord God of Israel there is always hope. At the dedication of the temple, Solomon offered a prayer to give the people hope. He knew that the people would forget God, forsake their covenant, and reap the consequences. But there would always be hope in repenting and returning to God. For God was and is always ready to hear his prodigal children, and help them return to him.

“Lord God of Israel, there is no God in heaven above or on earth below like You, who keep Your covenant and mercy with Your servants who walk before You with all their hearts...

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! And may You hear the supplication of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. Hear in heaven Your dwelling place; and when You hear, forgive...

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against You, when they pray...and confess Your name, and turn from their sin because You afflict them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, that You may teach them the good way in which they should walk; and send rain on Your land which You have given to Your people as an inheritance...

When there is famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers; when their enemy besieges them in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is;

whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all)...

Moreover, concerning a foreigner, who is not of Your people Israel, but has come from a far country for Your name's sake (for they will hear of Your great name and Your strong hand and Your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this temple, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel...

When they sin against You (for there is no one who does not sin), and You become angry with them and deliver them to the enemy, and they take them captive to the land of the enemy, far or near; yet when they come to themselves in the land where they were carried captive, and repent, and make supplication to You in the land of those who took them captive, saying, ‘We have sinned and done wrong, we have committed wickedness’; and when they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies...

then hear in heaven Your dwelling place their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause, and forgive Your people who have sinned against You...and grant them compassion before those who took them captive, that they may have compassion on them...

For You separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be Your inheritance, as You spoke by Your servant Moses, when You brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord God.”

I Kings 8 - *condensed by JCF*

When God decides to punish an individual or a whole nation, it is clear from history that He can be very tough on those who cast Him aside. But God is not a human. Even when this Being who has the unimaginable power necessary to create and sustain our vast material universe becomes angry, He remains merciful because that is His core nature. The northern Ten Tribes of Israel greatly angered Him by their rebellious, unthankful, and unholy conduct. God punished them with hardship and exile. But He neither completely destroyed them, nor deprived them of a wonderful physical and spiritual future.

But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home. See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown; and I will multiply your population, **the whole house of Israel, all of it**; the towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt; and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you.

They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am the LORD. I will lead people upon you—my people Israel—and they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. No longer shall you bereave them of children...

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. **A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you**; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. **I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and and be careful to observe my ordinances**. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezekiel 36 NRSV).



Spiritual Renewal & God's Covenant

At the end of his book, Ezekiel doesn't write of the destruction wrought by war or the punishments of famine and disease. He speaks of hope. The prophet reveals an in-depth vision of peace, beauty, justice, happiness, and contentment that will come through a renewal of the LORD's covenant of kinship will all those of humanity who are willing to be His people.

Lessons from Nehemiah

As Nehemiah turned the heart of his people to the Lord God in his day and renewed the covenant, so our nations need to have a change of heart to love and serve the Lord. We might begin, as Nehemiah did, by remembering God's faithfulness through the millennia in preserving his covenant with his people from generation to generation. Then in humility we can plead for forgiveness and restore our covenant relationship and begin walking with God.

"You are the Lord God,
who chose Abram,
and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans,
and gave him the name Abraham;
You found his heart faithful before You,
and made a covenant with him...

You came down also on Mount Sinai,
and spoke with them from heaven,
and gave them just ordinances and true laws,
good statutes and commandments.
You made known to them Your holy Sabbath,
and commanded them precepts, statutes and laws,
by the hand of Moses Your servant.

Nevertheless they were disobedient
and rebelled against You,
cast Your law behind their backs
and killed Your prophets, who testified against them
Therefore You delivered them into the hand of their
enemies, who oppressed them;

Nevertheless in Your great mercy
You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them;
For You *are* God, gracious and merciful.
and in the time of their trouble,
when they cried to You,
You heard from heaven;
And according to Your abundant mercies
You gave them deliverers who saved them
from the hand of their enemies.
But after they had rest,
they again did evil before You.

You left them in the hand of their enemies,
so that they had dominion over them;
Yet when they returned and cried out to You,
You heard from heaven;
And many times You delivered them
according to Your mercies,
and testified against them,
that You might bring them back to Your law.

Now therefore, our God,
the great, the mighty, and awesome God,
who keeps covenant and mercy:
Do not let all the trouble seem small before You
that has come upon us, our kings and our princes,
our priests and our prophets,
our fathers and on all Your people,
from the days of the kings of Assyria until this day.

However, You *are* just in all that has befallen us;
For You have dealt faithfully,
but we have done wickedly.
Neither our kings nor our princes,
our priests nor our fathers have kept Your law,
nor Your commandments and Your testimonies,
with which You testified against them.
For they have not served You in their kingdom,
or in the many good *things* that You gave them,
or in the large and rich land You set before them;
Nor did they turn from their wicked works.

Here we *are*, servants today!
in the land that You gave to our fathers,
to eat its fruit and its bounty,
Here we *are*, servants in it!
and it yields much increase to the kings
You have set over us, because of our sins;
Also they have dominion over our bodies
and our cattle at their pleasure;
and we *are* in great distress.
And because of all this,
we make a sure *covenant* and write *it...*"

Nehemiah 9 - condensed JCF

What Does the Future Hold?

Every generation has choices to make. Will we choose to ignore our spiritual heritage and identity? Will we, as nations and individuals, heed the lessons of history? Or does our self-imposed exile in the self-gratifying wilderness of materialism and hedonism seem too good to give up for the moment?

We can decide to continue walking on those easy but crooked trails that head to relativistic lowlands. Or we could pick the harder-looking, straight path that climbs up to the highlands, and a spectacular view of a divine Promised Land.

While I am decidedly idealistic and mostly optimistic, somehow my pragmatic side doesn't really think that we—Americans, Canadians, and our Northwestern European relatives—are ready as yet to renew our ancestors' covenant with God, nationally speaking. We just aren't ready to pay the price in major social reforms that such a covenant renewal would require.

Perhaps we don't see the need for any major changes in our personal lives as well. After all, life is so good presently. Our prosperity is without precedent. And are we not the architects of our own wealth? We like to do our own thing and be our own authority. And why not? Who can tell us otherwise? We may not recognize any credible military threat to our security on the horizon beyond a few minor terrorists. And we may think the present global status quo will last our lifetime. A generation ago many would have thought that we stood on the precipice of such overwhelming power that we could dominate the world for the next century. But our world is changing, isn't it? Are we being willfully blind to the dangerous situations on the horizon?

Though there is no real interest presently to undertake a major remodelling of our national lifestyle, yet we are seeing major rifts in our social compact. We still have faith that our scientific genius, wealth, and military power will take care of us. Our pride in the works of our hands is swelling. Are there really any limits to what we can do with our technology? While we still hesitate to print it on our money, in many minds we have already become our own god! Don't we already worship the works of our own hands? We may not believe that we really need any God, let alone the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel. Nevertheless, just to be on the safe side, and to still that little voice in the back of our heads, some of us may on occasion give public lip service to our ancestors' invisible God, the LORD of Heaven's armies. But is it sincere or merely another way to feel good about ourselves or impress others with our spirituality?

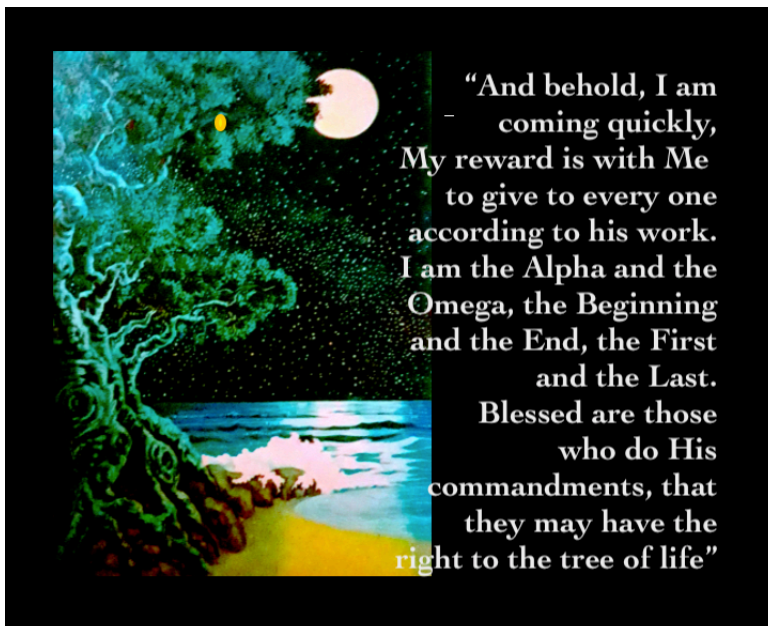
Given our family of nations' current mindset, what is in store for us? It is a future very different from what is typically conjured up today by our public policy think tanks and scientific, military planners. Those responsible for charting the course of our nations omit a key factor when it comes to developing their scenarios of the future. They have forgotten their divine covenant partner. Yet the LORD does not forget. He knows the true state of our national psyche. He laments that we honor Him with our lips but our hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). When He views our nations He is not impressed by our gross GDP, our technological cleverness, or our arsenals of mass destruction. Rather, He is grieved by our ingratitude, slipshod justice, and moral

ambivalence. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel has not forgotten His kin by covenant. For millennia He has kept His promises, for blessing or cursing, and he will continue to do so.

So I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news you can hear daily from your favourite media outlet or by reading the writings of the prophets. God is just. He will not let the guilty go unpunished, so a lot of what we see in our world is the result of cause and consequence. And if our people choose to continue to ignore God's reality and sow foolishness, then we will reap a bad harvest. However, the good news is that God testifies to the descendants of ancient Israel and all humanity that because He doesn't change, we will not be completely destroyed by our foolish actions. Hopelessness is not our collective destiny (cf. Malachi 3:6). We, the people of the Lord God by covenant, will survive as a national entity. The Book of books says so!

But what about you as an individual? Your own personal future does not have such a definitive assurance. None of us has his or her name specifically written in the Scriptures. Our individual destinies are very much in play in this great realtime game we call life. Yet each one of us has the assurance that the great spiritual Father of all Israel is *rab hesed*, full of faithfulness, lovingkindness, and grace. The wise have faith in this. They seek His mercy and His will in their lives. All those of every ethnic group who identify themselves with the God of Israel will renew the covenant relationship they have as His kin, will love the Lord, and walk in all His ways.

Whether nationally or individually we will reap what we have sown. If we want to reap what is good then we must seek God with a humble heart and live in harmony with him. God says that all who seek him sincerely will find him. And having found him, all are able to be a part of God's covenant people, his children.



This was Paul's message to the Romans, a multiethnic people. For all who are led by God's spirit become grafted into Israel, and have a covenant relationship with God. And having been grafted into Israel, they become rooted into the family tree and are the kin of Christ, the Lord God of Israel. In this way all those who believe and obey God can become heirs of Abraham and inheritors of all God's covenant promises, including the promise of eternal life.

Your spiritual roots will determine your destiny, now and for eternity.

Your Roots Your Destiny - Revelation 22