

Chapter 16: Postcards from the Edge

1. God wants to use you in His plans, but He doesn't _____.

The LORD has rejected the people of Israel because they have made alliances with foreigners from the East who practice magic and divination, just like the Philistines. Israel has vast treasures of silver and gold and many horses and chariots. The land is filled with idols. The people bow down and worship these things they have made. So now everyone will be humbled and brought low. The LORD cannot simply ignore their sins! Crawl into caves in the rocks. Hide from the terror of the LORD and the glory of his majesty. The day is coming when your pride will be brought low and the LORD alone will be exalted. In that day the LORD Almighty will punish the proud, bringing them down to the dust.

Isaiah 2:6-12

2. Your enemies will always lure you toward the _____.

3. *Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Matthew 7:13-14

Look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

Matthew 7:13-14, MSG

Some trust in their war chariots and others in their horses, but we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

Psalms 20:7

4. What moves the hand of God: _____ and _____.

In the very first month of the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the doors of the Temple of the LORD and repaired them. He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the LORD, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary. Our ancestors were unfaithful and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God. They abandoned the LORD and his Temple; they turned their backs on him. These men called together their fellow Levites, and they purified themselves. Then they began to purify the Temple of the LORD, just as the king had commanded. They were careful to follow all

the LORD's instructions in their work. The priests went into the sanctuary of the Temple of the LORD to cleanse it, and they took out to the Temple courtyard all the defiled things they found.

2 Chronicles 29:3ff

5. Despite this miracle, Judah was still taken into _____.

a. _____ against God (Isa. 1:2-3)

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

Isaiah 1:2-3

b. Empty _____

"The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths, and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Isaiah 1:11,13

c. _____ injustice

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her — but now murderers! Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.

Isaiah 1:21, 23

6. We have much to learn about _____ as fathers.

Today's Equipping Point

***Become fathers that show _____
mercy.***

Discussion Questions

1. Where have you been tempted to take the easy road?
2. What do you need to purify?
3. What's the difference between unconditional mercy and enabling someone's misbehavior?

Teaching Script

[Review splitting of kingdoms, messengers from last week.]

Now, this is the beginning of the end of the Northern Kingdom. For 209 years, the northern kingdom had endured one evil king after another. Their failure to keep God's covenant meant that they would be expelled from the covenant. They had been chosen to be a blessing to all other nations, but now they would now be delivered over to the very nations that compromised them.

Sure enough, the Assyrian army destroyed the capital city of Samaria and deported the Israelites throughout Assyria. This dispersion guaranteed that the Northern Kingdom would never again be a nation. But even here, on the brink of their extinction as a nation, there are key lessons about God's timeless Upper Story. And so our lesson this morning is entitled, "Postcards from the Edge"—lessons from the precipice.

1. God wants to use you in His plans, but He doesn't *have to*.

From this point forward, the nation of Israel was history, and they only had themselves to blame. Listen to Isaiah 2:

The LORD has rejected the people of Israel because they have made alliances with foreigners from the East who practice magic and divination, just like the Philistines. Israel has vast treasures of silver and gold and many horses and chariots. The land is filled with idols. The people bow down and worship these things they have made. So now everyone will be humbled and brought low. The LORD cannot simply ignore their sins! Crawl into caves in the rocks. Hide from the terror of the LORD and the glory of his majesty. The day is coming when your pride will be brought low and the LORD alone will be exalted. In that day the LORD Almighty will punish the proud, bringing them down to the dust.

Isaiah 2:6-12

Jesus needs people to do His work in the world, but the choice is ours to make. Our first takeaway this morning is that it is a privilege to be included by God and used in His kingdom, but it's never a given. He owes us nothing. And should we continue to choose our own selfish way, God will, in the end, grant that wish. Let us take our first lesson this morning from what used to be the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and make sure we're fully on board.

Meanwhile, just to the south in the kingdom of Judah, godly King Hezekiah was nervously watching these world-shaking events on his northern border. Hezekiah stands out from all of the other kings of Judah for his efforts to remove every vestige of idolatry in the land. He rebelled against the new Assyrian king Sennacherib. The Assyrians sent envoys, claiming that they wanted to negotiate a peaceful surrender with Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Their reasoning was faultless: What other nation had been able to stand against the Assyrian might? Had not the Northern Kingdom already fallen? Sennacherib's commander appealed directly to the populace of Jerusalem speaking to them in Hebrew.

2. Your enemies will always taunt you toward the *path of least resistance*.

Their reasoning will be sound, and it will be tempting to give in. It will sound rational, and it usually will be the easiest option...

Stolen water is sweet... (Prov. 9)

There's a reason Solomon talks so much about sloth in Proverbs. You remember we talked a few weeks ago about the "sluggard" or lazy person as a man of wasted potential. Satan would like nothing more than for you to squander your efforts and take the path of least resistance. But listen to Jesus on the subject:

*Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is **easy** that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Matthew 7:13-14

Or, as the Message puts it:

Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention.

Matthew 7:13-14 MSG

King Hezekiah trusted in the LORD and prayed for deliverance. The easy road would have been to give in to the twisted logic of Sennacherib's argument—to just capitulate—hey, maybe we'll save some lives in the process.

But that would be a response without faith. The prophet Isaiah promised that God would deliver them. Perhaps as he surveyed the army surrounding them, Hezekiah remembered the words of King David:

Some trust in their war chariots and others in their horses, but we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

Psalms 20:7

I submit to you this morning that just when hope seems lost, just when it seems darkest, just when your own war-gaming runs out of options, THAT is precisely the point where faith begins. The same faith that led Hezekiah to purge the land of idols is the faith that led him to trust that 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were no match for the Lord. You can have your horses, your chariots, your artillery—but we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

You know, I'm guessing is that some of us need to say this out loud this morning. It may be a season of unemployment or economic pressure...a season of conflict in your marriage...a season of uncertainty or transition...or maybe it's just a dry season...a desert sojourn where God seems very far away and even your most sincere prayers ring hollow. Maybe, like Hezekiah, you feel under siege. If so, you need to say this out loud.

It's one thing to read a Scripture, nod, and reflect on its philosophical truth (hmmm, that's a good thought...). It's another to say it out loud and make it your own. As they say,

you've got to name it if you're going to claim it. So put an asterisk on your outlines and clear your throats...ready?

And what happened the next morning? The angel of the LORD had swept through the Assyrian camp much like God had swept through Egypt centuries ago, and all those horses and chariots didn't amount to a hill of beans. Sometimes, you just need to declare it out loud, and make God's truth your own.

The third Postcard from the Edge:

3. We see what moves the hand of God: *prayers and purity*.

Hezekiah was an abnormality, an exception to the line of the kings of Judah. He was faithful to remove every remnant of their idolatry, and *purify* the people by pointing them back to the one true God. And so the Lord heard his prayers and delivered Judah from the fate of the Northern Kingdom.

This is really important, so I want us to read this carefully:

In the very first month of the first year of his reign, Hezekiah reopened the doors of the Temple of the LORD and repaired them. He summoned the priests and Levites to meet him at the courtyard east of the Temple. He said to them, "Listen to me, you Levites! Purify yourselves, and purify the Temple of the LORD, the God of your ancestors. Remove all the defiled things from the sanctuary. Our ancestors were unfaithful and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God. They abandoned the LORD and his Temple; they turned their backs on him.

These men called together their fellow Levites, and they purified themselves. Then they began to purify the Temple of the LORD, just as the king had commanded. They were careful to follow all the LORD's instructions in their work. The priests went into the sanctuary of the Temple of the LORD to cleanse it, and they took out to the Temple courtyard all the defiled things they found.

2 Chronicles 29:3ff

What, if anything, is hindering your prayers? The very first place to look is within—is there sin in the camp? Remember Achan in the book of Joshua? Achan had personally taken spoils from one of the battles and hid them in his tent. When Israel was defeated at what should have been an easy victory, Joshua understood there was an unconfessed sin that caused God to remove His hand from their victory march. The impurity was rooted out, and Achan and his family and the spoils were stoned and then burned outside the camp.

Which leads to another point: I want you to notice something huge about this purity issue. God didn't stop just answering Achan's prayers because he had sinned—the entire nation of Israel was stopped in their march to conquer the Promised Land because of this man's sin, and his entire family paid the price with him.

Are there unconfessed strongholds of the enemy that you have not surrendered? Is there impurity in your camp? The Bible tells us that unconfessed impurity and strongholds of sin affect not just you, but everyone you influence: our family suffers when we don't deal with our own weaknesses.

But...but...look at what's available to you when you purify your hearts and make a request to God: armies of 185,000 enemies fall dead at your feet and victory is given to those who come clean, confess their sin, and get their hearts in order.

Are you in need of one of these Hezekiah miracles today? Have you been praying and praying for relief? We have ample evidence here of what moves the hand of God: His people's purity and prayers.

4. **Despite this miracle, Judah was still taken into captivity.**

Over and over again, we've seen how huge warning signs are disregarded—how the fate of one group of people does nothing to sober up the people who watched the train wreck. You'd think that sooner or later Israel would see the consequences and learn something. It's kind of like those horrific pictures they show you in driver's education of the mangled, bloody remains of those who don't wear their seat belt or who drink and drive. The pictures are supposed to scare you into compliance.

But somehow, those lessons always seem lost on God's chosen people. The northern tribes were taken captive to Assyria to serve as an example to Judah, but the object lesson failed.

Isaiah was sent to tell them they had blown their chance and the first chapter of his book gives us the three key problems God saw in their hearts:

a. **Rebellion against God** ("You are not God to me.")

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

Isaiah 1:2-3

b. **Empty religion**

The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

Isaiah 1:11,13

c. **Social injustice**

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her— but now murderers! Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.

Isaiah 1:21, 23

Notice the natural progression. Rebellion against God will inevitably lead to empty worship. God will not be mocked. It is an abomination to worship God with insincerity, and to go through the motions with an unpurified heart. And what follows? The social structure just disintegrates into chaos. Why? Because self-centered people oppress and mistreat others; only God-centered people love and serve others.

This is why Hezekiah's acts of purification, repentance, and confession were so important. He had led the way, but as soon as he was gone, that failure of purity caused rebellion, empty worship, and social injustice. It all ties together.

5. We have much to learn about mercy as fathers.

God spared the Southern Kingdom from Assyrian takeover, knowing that in just a short amount of time, they would reject Him once more. It was déjà vu all over again.

Know this morning that even if you mess up again, God will provide a way of escape—you *can still return*. This is very opposite to human tendencies—if I knew my daughter was about to totally disregard the grace I was about to show, I'd be reluctant to give it. But we cannot miss the huge point in this chapter that even though He has perfect knowledge, and knows precisely when we will sin again, God still grants us forgiveness and mercy and deliverance from 185,000 enemies, despite our fickleness and two-timing, two-faced nature.

So let's make that our **Equipping Point for today:**

Let's take a page from the mercy of a God who delivers us despite our imminent betrayal, and become fathers that show unconditional mercy.

Do you have so much of the Holy Spirit living in you that you could forgive and speak graciously your children if you knew tomorrow they'd do it again? Can we today overcome our human tendency to keep a ledger of wrongs for the next time our kids or our wives trip up?

If God can deliver Judah from an army of Assyrians just before they turned their backs on Him again, if He can forgive me from my self-centeredness, then I can show mercy to my children, who are destined to disappoint me tomorrow.

How is this possible? How does my cheating, unfaithful heart get a new chance every day? How are His mercies new every morning? How can Paul say there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus?

Isaiah tells us how. He tells us about a Servant who will suffer in order to make us whole. And so, as we close this morning, let's listen with fresh ears to the matchless 53rd chapter of Isaiah. Would you stand in reverence for Scripture as we read (from *The Story* beginning on page 228...).

How can His mercies be new every morning? That's how...that's how God can forgive me today as if I'd never sinned yesterday. That's how I learn about mercy as a father—by understanding what the Suffering Servant did for me. That's how I guard against empty religion: who could not fall at the feet of this man? That's how I overcome apathy to the

great social needs of today: if this Jesus would assume this humiliation and pain for all of humanity, are they not worthy of my attention as well? That's how I avoid the sin of Achan, the encroachment of impurity in my life: to stand in awe of what it cost this man to reconcile me to God.

It may have been the beginning of the end of Israel. But in God's great Upper Story, when Isaiah describes a humble Savior's obedience, it's not the beginning of the end. Quite the opposite: He is the beginning of our eternity.

[Prayer]

Lord we have heard Hezekiah's call to purification—please cleanse us from our impurities.

I pray for the men in this room today who are on the edge—on the precipice, running low on hope, hearing our common enemy tempting us with the easy way out. Show us more than the horses and chariots that seem to surround us. Show us the same angels that delivered Elisha, the same angels that conquered the Assyrian army, ready to deliver, to save, to stand watch over us. Today we proclaim again that we trust in the power of the Lord our God.

In the name of the One whose wounds have healed us,