

Chapter 17: All's Lost, All's Found

The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 9:9-10

The law was three-fold in purpose:

- _____ — to teach Israel to be a holy nation
- _____ — reveals the nature and character of God and sin
- _____ — demonstrated the need for a Savior

But something more was needed...

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect...

Hebrews 7:18-19

If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need for a second covenant to replace it.

Hebrews 8:7

Jeremiah

“The day will come,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the LORD.

“But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day,” says the LORD. “I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their family, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will already know me,” says the LORD. “And I will forgive their wickedness and will never again remember their sins.”

Jeremiah 31”31-34

Ezekiel

“For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so you will obey my laws and do whatever I command.”

Ezekiel 36:24-27

That old system of law etched in stone led to death, yet it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face. Shouldn't we expect far greater glory when the Holy Spirit is giving life? If the old covenant, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new covenant, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new covenant.

2 Corinthians 3:7-10

Old Covenant

Law brought awareness of sin
Carved on tablets of stone
Time-sensitive, limited atonement
Sinful High Priest
Externally based
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Passover looks back to bitterness/slavery
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And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. This is the new, life-giving way that Christ has opened up for us through the sacred curtain, by means of his death for us. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's people, let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:19-22

Discussion Questions

1. Why does God sometimes let things fall so far before a word of hope?
2. How dark has your place of loneliness, separation, or captivity been?
3. How has God put you back together again?

Teaching Script

[Top 10 Good Things About Turning 50]

Northern Kingdom captured, Southern Kingdom delivered, but Hezekiah died and they returned to their evil ways. They learned nothing from their own miraculous rescue. Hezekiah's son Manasseh ascended to the throne and unraveled his father's spiritual heritage. His reign marked a spiritual relapse from which the kingdom of Judah would not recover. One of his most detestable practices was the subversion and ruin of the sacrificial system. He set up altars in the LORD's temple to Baal, to the stars, and worst of all, an altar where his own son was burned in the fire. This degradation of the sacrificial system is important—we're going to return to it in a minute.

As a result God's people would not return to Him. So God did what He said He would do—He sent foreign armies to raid Judah. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar laid three sieges against Judah and Jerusalem. The king and the prophet, Ezekiel, were among their prisoners. Ezekiel went along to speak truth to the exiles who disregarded their guilt, even when faced with such stern judgment.

In the last of the attacks, in 586 BC, the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem. They demolished the city, looted the temple and led the people away to Babylon. Jeremiah was among the few who were left behind.

Now that we've set the stage, remember Manasseh and his perversion of the offerings. It's critical to look at the prescribed sacrifices of the OT because this is the **key** to seeing the big picture, the Upper Story of Chapter 17.

This pattern of animal, grain, and drink offerings was instituted as a temporary means of atoning for sin, cleansing the people from the impurities that separated them from their God. They were necessary to present the Jews as holy to the holy God who made them, but they were not designed to be a permanent system.

The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order. (Hebrews 9:9-10.)

The law served as a way that God's people could demonstrate their allegiance and obedience to the LORD. They were three-fold in purpose:

- Regulatory—to teach Israel to be a holy nation, and respond to the LORD as such.
- Revelatory—reveals the nature and character of a holy God and reveals sin.
- Preparatory—demonstrated the need for a Savior

They'd never done very well. They wanted to return to the gods of Egypt and build golden calves while their sandals were still soggy from the bottom of the Red Sea. Israel's history, as we have seen through *The Story*, is fraught with her continued failure to remain in obedience to the Law.

The righteousness of the LORD compelled Him to send warnings to Israel to return to a covenant relationship with Him—just as you would plead with an unfaithful spouse to heed her promises. He revealed Himself through deliverance from enemies, through prophets (such as Elijah, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah), and through miraculous events like the ten plagues, Elijah's 3-year drought, and the showdown on Mt. Carmel. Yet it was never enough to keep Israel in the fairway.

Approximately 850 years after the LORD gave Moses the Law, Judah went into captivity, about 125 years after the Northern tribes. This nation in possession of the Promised Land was now expelled from the Land by their own doing, and by God's permission.

Exiled into foreign nations and cast out of the Land of their inheritance, they were destitute. They had every possible advantage to become holy and to live up to their high calling. They had been redeemed; they had seen and experienced the miracles and acts of the LORD; they had His written word; they had the Covenant of the Law. Yet the sin nature reigned mightier than all these other things put together. If Israel couldn't cut it with all these advantages, then what hope was there for anyone? If the Covenant of the Law wasn't enough, what would it take?

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Israel had failed over and over, but the key was not to lower the standards—God couldn't do that and still be God. The question was this: how to make the work of God more intimate and personal to each believer? To move closer, to take the next step toward the humanity He created? The current system was patchwork.

Think of an office system. Before automation, you had to print off a document, go feed it into the copier, staple each set of copies, then hole-punch each set, and then bind them together. Now a seamless office system running on a central server can do all of the copying, stapling, collating, and binding from your desk.

Like in the days before computers, Judah could not imagine that God would have an outside-of-the-box answer for their problem.

Think for a moment of all the things that have become obsolete over the years.

I want you to be honest: How many of you still have vinyl records at home? Worse than that, how many of you still have 8-tracks? Then there were cassette tapes, and reel-to-reel, then CDs, and now songs have no physical properties whatsoever: they're just a stream of 1's and 0's on an MP3 file in an iPOD.

I can remember getting on my knees and thanking God for Liquid Paper in college, you know, hip deep in a 20-page term paper. Would any of us like to return to a manual, patchwork system? Of course not. Why? Because the new is infinitely better than the old.

That's why we just can't miss this amazing chapter in *The Story*. At perhaps the lowest point in Israel's life, one kingdom was gone and a second was on the way to captivity. Judah was experiencing the discipline of the LORD for their failure to live by the Old Covenant when God promised a future covenant that would be everlasting. All Judah could see was their "lower story" circumstances: captivity, slavery, and humiliation...the consequences of generations of bad choices.

And so, into this devastation, into this spiritual wasteland, into this most unexpected place and time, came a word of hope from Jeremiah to the few left in Jerusalem:

"The day will come," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife," says the LORD.

"But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the LORD. "I will put my laws in their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their family, saying, 'You should know the LORD.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will already know me," says the LORD. "And I will forgive their wickedness and will never again remember their sins."

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Then, at about the same time in Babylon, smack in the middle of the stench of subjection and indignity, a prophet named Ezekiel says something eerily similar:

"For I will gather you up from all the nations and bring you home again to your land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony heart of sin and give you a new, obedient heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so you will obey my laws and do whatever I command."

Ezekiel 36:24-27

Even in the midst of almost total darkness, the stunning Upper Story of God cannot be extinguished, smothered or constrained! Into the most unlikely and desperate of situations, through Jeremiah AND Ezekiel, God speaks His life-giving word of renewal and irrational hope. You really cannot miss the wonder of His timing here. But that's not all!

Here's the really cool part: this New Covenant spoken of is infinitely better because it deals once and for all with sin.

In business terms, it's a seamless process where we turn to a sole supplier. We put our faith in Him, and in the ultimate turnkey operation, He does everything: He creates the avenue back to Him, He provides the enduring sacrifice, He seals us with His Spirit, and holds us in His hand until we're glorified with Him. This is a fool-proof, ISO-9000 inspected, Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award process—and it's all for us! No more bulls, goats, rams or lambs—just God Himself, re-engineering everything from access to forgiveness to redemption. That, gentlemen, is a God worthy of our worship!

The sin problem is a heart problem. But now, instead of an external Law, God's actual nature becomes part of his people because His Spirit lives here. Every time I think about it, it just blows me away!

And how was this accomplished? We found that out last week: the Suffering Servant of Isaiah's prophecy, who would remove the need for continual sacrifices, who would inaugurate a new intimacy between the God and His creation—who still required death as a payment for sin, but now would shed His own blood, making obsolete the repetitive slaughter of animals and ordaining a new kind of Passover meal where blood spread over the doorposts of homes was replaced by blood on a different kind of wooden post.

Here's how Paul described the difference when he wrote to the Corinthians:

That old system of law etched in stone led to death, yet it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face. Shouldn't we expect far greater glory when the Holy Spirit is giving life? If the old covenant, which brings condemnation, was glorious, how much more glorious is the new covenant, which makes us right with God! In fact, that first glory was not glorious at all compared with the overwhelming glory of the new covenant.

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And so the result?

And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. This is the new, life-giving way that Christ has opened up for us through the sacred curtain, by means of his death for us. And since we have a great High Priest who rules over God's people, let us go right into the presence of God, with true hearts fully trusting him. For our evil consciences

have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:19-22

The title of Chapter 17 in *The Story* is “The Kingdom’s Fall.” It is certainly a convicting, sobering time in the history of a nation of such great promise, who had so much going for it, and who, if they’d only asked, had the God of Creation ready to lead them. But still, the kingdom fell, and fell hard. What a tragedy.

But before we leave what would seem to be a downer of a chapter, it’s important to see the Upper Story: during what is arguably the darkest time in the history of Israel, God gives a clear window into a new arrangement so unexpected, so out-of-the-box, so startling and unpredictable, that we can hardly contain it.

God never fails to give hope to the faithful. While the Northern Kingdom was disintegrating, He used Isaiah to tell of a Suffering Servant who would heal us by His wounds. And now, as most of the Southern Kingdom is carted off to Babylon and a small, dejected remainder stays in Jerusalem, He uses Ezekiel and Jeremiah to tell the same astonishing story of a new promise, a new heart, and sins that will never again be remembered.

The last thing for us to take away from this seemingly bankrupt story is that even in the depths of gloom, God still has a promise He is fulfilling. Even in the loneliest circumstances of captivity, as far from home as you are, there is hope.

I suspect some of you today are in the midst of a split—perhaps not of a kingdom, but maybe of a marriage or a working relationship. You are living in a divided world, and as you look back, you can see a lot of things you would have done differently. My message to you is that even in a painful separation, whether it can be repaired or not, God never stops communicating with you. Just like He sent Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah to encourage His people, He loves **you** enough to ensure there are prophets in your life so that even in a desperate state, you’ll still hear His voice.

Maybe today you find yourself in captivity, surrounded by unfriendlies or hostiles, a long way from where you should be. God’s promise to you is that if you repent, exile isn’t forever. God disciplines those He loves, and isolation can be a sobering thing. We’ll see in a couple of chapters that God arranges world events such that Judah can come back and rebuild Jerusalem and the walls, and how He provides for them is no less than amazing. There **IS** a way out, and today if you’re in the dark and can’t see it at all, remember God **listens** to a penitent heart and just as he led Joseph from the dungeon, and brought his people out of Babylon, he hears your voice too.

How do I know? In Babylon, God told Ezekiel that all was not lost—that He would one day cleanse and restore them. To illustrate His point, God pointed to a valley of dry, barren, detached bones and asked, “Can these bones live?” When Ezekiel spoke God’s message to the bones, they came to life and stood like a vast army. This astonishing demonstration confirmed that even exile in Babylon would not hinder God’s great Upper Story. God can put you back together in just the same way.

THE STORY

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON GUIDE

And so our title this morning is “All’s lost, all’s found.” Just when you think it’s over, it’s not.

Because the promise is for the faithful—even for those of us in the weeds, for those of us split apart, or in a hostile environment, the promise is that if we turn our hearts, God WILL literally put us back together again...that His hand of blessing would return...and we WILL be resurrected from bodies of dust and sin, to bodies reassembled by God Himself, sprinkled clean, our filth washed away, and a new, obedient heart within, never again to be captive, divided, or separated from His love. In one of the darkest times of the Bible, these are the promises of God. The road has been paved, the sacrifice has been made—let us walk then, as sons of light.