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Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition Chapter 23 – “The Assyrian Captivity”

The closing years of the ill-fated kingdom of Israel were marked with violence and bloodshed such as had never been witnessed even in the worst periods of strife and unrest under the house of Ahab. For two centuries and more the rulers of the ten tribes had been sowing the wind; now they were reaping the whirlwind. King after king was assassinated to make way for others ambitious to rule. "They have set up kings," the Lord declared of these godless usurpers, "but not by Me: they have made princes, and I knew it not." Hosea 8:4. Every principle of justice was set aside; those who should have stood before the nations of earth as the depositaries of divine grace, "dealt treacherously against the Lord" and with one another. Hosea 5:7.

With the severest reproofs, God sought to arouse the impenitent nation to a realization of its imminent danger of utter destruction. Through Hosea and Amos He sent the ten tribes message after message, urging full and complete repentance, and threatening disaster as the result of continued transgression. "Ye have plowed wickedness," declared Hosea, "ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies: because thou didst trust in thy way, in the multitude of thy mighty men. Therefore shall a tumult arise among thy people, and all thy fortresses shall be spoiled. . . . In a morning shall the king of Israel utterly be cut off." Hosea 10:13-15.

Of Ephraim the prophet testified, "Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not: yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not." [The prophet Hosea often referred to Ephraim, a leader in apostasy among the tribes of Israel, as a symbol of the apostate nation.] "Israel hath cast off the thing that is good." "Broken in judgment," unable to discern the disastrous outcome of their evil course, the ten tribes were soon to be "wanderers among the nations." Hosea 7:9; 8:3; Hosea 5:11; 9:17.

Some of the leaders in Israel felt keenly their loss of prestige and wished that this might be regained. But instead of turning away from those practices which had brought weakness to the kingdom, they continued in iniquity, flattering themselves that when occasion arose, they would attain to the political power they desired by allying themselves with the heathen. "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian." "Ephraim also is like a silly dove without heart: they call to Egypt, they go to Assyria." "They do make a covenant with the Assyrians." Hosea 5:13; 7:11; Hosea 12:1.

Through the man of God that had appeared before the altar at Bethel, through Elijah and Elisha, through Amos and Hosea, the Lord had repeatedly set before the ten tribes the evils of disobedience. But notwithstanding reproof and entreaty, Israel had sunk lower and still lower in apostasy. "Israel slideth back as a backsliding heifer," the Lord declared; "My people are bent to backsliding from Me." Hosea 4:16; 11:7.

There were times when the judgments of Heaven fell very heavily on the rebellious people. "I hewed them by the prophets," God declared; "I have slain them by the words of My mouth: and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth. For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against Me." Hosea 6:5-7.

"Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel," was the message that finally came to them: "Seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children. As they were increased, so they sinned against Me: therefore will I change their glory into shame. . . . I will punish them for their ways, and reward them their doings." Hosea 4:1, 6-9.

The iniquity in Israel during the last half century before the Assyrian captivity was like that of the days of Noah, and of every other age when men have rejected God and have given themselves wholly to evil-doing. The exaltation of nature above the God of nature, the worship of the creature instead of the Creator, has always resulted in the grossest of evils. Thus when the people of Israel, in their worship of Baal and Ashtoreth, paid supreme homage to the forces of nature, they severed their connection with all that is uplifting and ennobling, and fell an easy prey to temptation. With the defenses of the soul broken down, the misguided worshipers had no barrier against sin and yielded themselves to the evil passions of the human heart.

Against the marked oppression, the flagrant injustice, the unwonted luxury and extravagance, the shameless feasting and drunkenness, the gross licentiousness and debauchery, of their age, the prophets lifted their voices; but in vain were their protests, in vain their denunciation of sin. "Him that rebuketh in the gate," declared Amos, "they hate, . . . and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly." "They afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right." Amos 5:10, 12.

Such were some of the results that had followed the setting up of two calves of gold by Jeroboam. The first departure from established forms of worship had led to the introduction of grosser forms of idolatry, until finally nearly all the inhabitants of the land had given themselves over to the alluring practices of nature worship. Forgetting their Maker, Israel "deeply corrupted themselves." Hosea 9:9.

The prophets continued to protest against these evils and to plead for rightdoing. "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy," Hosea urged; "break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you." "Turn thou to thy God: keep mercy and judgment, and wait on thy God continually." "O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity: . . . say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously." Hosea 10:12; 12:6; Hosea 14:1, 2.

The transgressors were given many opportunities to repent. In their hour of deepest apostasy and greatest need, God's message to them was one of forgiveness and hope. "O Israel," He declared, "thou hast destroyed thyself; but in Me is thine help. I will be thy King: where is any other that may save thee?" Hosea 13:9, 10.

"Come, and let us return unto the Lord," the prophet entreated; "for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and He will bind us up. After two days will He revive us: in the third day He will raise us up, and we shall live in His sight. Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord: His going forth is prepared as the morning; and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth." Hosea 6:1-3.

To those who had lost sight of the plan of the ages for the deliverance of sinners ensnared by the power of Satan, the Lord offered restoration and peace. "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely," He declared: "for Mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under His shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim shall say, What have to do any more with idols? I have heard him, and observed him: I am like a green fir tree. From Me is thy fruit found.

"Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? Prudent, and he shall know them?

For the ways of the Lord are right, And the just shall walk in them:

But the transgressors shall fall therein." Hosea 14:4-9.

The benefits of seeking God were strongly urged. "Seek ye Me," the Lord invited, "and ye shall live: but seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beersheba: for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nought."

"Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the Lord, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken. Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph." Amos 5:4, 5, 14, 15.

By far the greater number of those who heard these invitations refused to profit by them. So contrary to the evil desires of the impenitent were the words of God's messengers, that the idolatrous priest at Bethel sent to the ruler in Israel, saying, "Amos hath conspired against thee in the midst of the house of Israel: the land is not able to bear all his words." Amos 7:10.

Through Hosea the Lord declared, "When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was discovered, and the wickedness of Samaria." "The pride of Israel testifieth to his face: and they do not return to the Lord their God, nor seek Him for all this. " Hosea 7:1, 10.

From generation to generation the Lord had borne with His wayward children, and even now, in the face of defiant rebellion, He still longed to reveal Himself to them as willing to save. "O Ephraim," He cried, "what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away." Hosea 6:4.

The evils that had overspread the land had become incurable; and upon Israel was pronounced the dread sentence: "Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone." "The days of visitation are come, the days of recompense are come; Israel shall know it." Hosea 4:17; 9:7.

The ten tribes of Israel were now to reap the fruitage of the apostasy that had taken form with the setting up of the strange altars at Bethel and at Dan. God's message to them was: "Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off; Mine anger is kindled against them: how long will it be ere they attain to innocency? For from Israel was it also: the workman made it; therefore it is not God: but the calf of Samaria shall be broken in pieces." "The inhabitants of Samaria shall fear because of the calves of Beth-aven: for the people thereof shall mourn over it, and the priests thereof that rejoiced on it. . . . It shall be also carried unto Assyria for a present to King Jareb" (Sennacherib). Hosea 8:5, 6; 10:5, 6.

"Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth; saying that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, saith the Lord. For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth. All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, which say, The evil shall not overtake nor prevent us."

"The houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end, saith the Lord." "The Lord God of hosts is He that toucheth the land, and it shall melt, and all that dwell therein shall mourn." "Thy sons and thy daughters shall fall by the sword, and thy land shall be divided by line; and thou shalt die in a polluted land: and Israel shall surely go into captivity forth of his land." "Because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel." Amos 9:8-10; 3:15; Amos 9:5; 7:17; Amos 4:12.

For a season these predicted judgments were stayed, and during the long reign of Jeroboam II the armies of Israel gained signal victories; but this time of apparent prosperity wrought no change in the hearts of the impenitent, and it was finally decreed, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel shall surely be led away captive out of their own land." Amos 7:11.

The boldness of this utterance was lost on king and people, so far had they gone in impenitence. Amaziah, a leader among the idolatrous priests at Bethel, stirred by the plain words spoken by the prophet against the nation and their king, said to Amos, "O thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there: but prophesy not again any more at Bethel: for it is the king's chapel, and it is the king's court." Verses 12, 13.

To this the prophet firmly responded: "Thus saith the Lord, . . . Israel shall surely go into captivity." Verse 17.

The words spoken against the apostate tribes were literally fulfilled; yet the destruction of the kingdom came gradually. In judgment the Lord remembered mercy, and at first, when "Pul the king of Assyria came against the land," Menahem, then king of Israel, was not taken captive, but was permitted to remain on the throne as a vassal of the Assyrian realm. "Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, that his hand might be with him to confirm the kingdom in his hand. And Menahem exacted the money of Israel, even of all the mighty men of wealth, of each man fifty shekels of silver, to give to the king of Assyria." 2 Kings 15:19, 20. The Assyrians, having humbled the ten tribes, returned for a season to their own land.

Menahem, far from repenting of the evil that had wrought ruin in his kingdom, continued in "the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin." Pekahiah and Pekah, his successors, also "did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." Verses 18, 24, 28. "In the days of Pekah," who reigned twenty years, Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, invaded Israel and carried away with him a multitude of captives from among the tribes living in Galilee and east of the Jordan. "The Reubenites, and the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh," with others of the inhabitants of "Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali" (1 Chronicles 5:26; 2 Kings 15:29), were scattered among the heathen in lands far removed from Palestine.

From this terrible blow the northern kingdom never recovered. The feeble remnant continued the forms of government, though no longer possessed of power. Only one more ruler, Hoshea, was to follow Pekah. Soon the kingdom was to be swept away forever. But in that time of sorrow and distress God still remembered mercy, and gave the people another opportunity to turn from idolatry. In the third year of Hoshea's reign, good King Hezekiah began to rule in Judah and as speedily as possible instituted important reforms in the temple service at Jerusalem. A Passover celebration was arranged for, and to this feast were invited not only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, over which Hezekiah had been anointed king, but all the northern tribes as well. A proclamation was sounded "throughout all Israel, from Beersheba even to Dan, that they should come to keep the Passover unto the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem: for they had not done it of a long time in such sort as it was written. {PK 287.3}

"So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah," with the pressing invitation, "Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and He will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. . . . Be ye not stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the Lord, and enter into His sanctuary, which He hath sanctified forever: and serve the Lord your God, that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you. For if ye turn again unto the Lord, your brethren and your children shall find compassion before them that lead them captive, so that they shall come again into this land: for the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away His face from you; if ye return unto Him." 2 Chronicles 30:5-9.

"From city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh even unto Zebulun," the couriers sent out by Hezekiah carried the message. Israel should have recognized in this invitation an appeal to repent and turn to God. But the remnant of the ten tribes still dwelling within the territory of the once-flourishing northern kingdom treated the royal messengers from Judah with indifference and even with contempt. "They laughed them to scorn, and mocked them." There were a few, however, who gladly responded. "Divers of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem, . . . to keep the feast of unleavened bread." Verses 10-13.

About two years later, Samaria was invested by the hosts of Assyria under Shalmaneser; and in the siege that followed, multitudes perished miserably of hunger and disease as well as by the sword. The city and nation fell, and the broken remnant of the ten tribes were carried away captive and scattered in the provinces of the Assyrian realm.

The destruction that befell the northern kingdom was a direct judgment from Heaven. The Assyrians were merely the instruments that God used to carry out His purpose. Through Isaiah, who began to prophesy shortly before the fall of Samaria, the Lord referred to the Assyrian hosts as "the rod of Mine anger." "The staff in their hand," He said, "is Mine indignation." Isaiah 10:5.

Grievously had the children of Israel "sinned against the Lord their God, . . . and wrought wicked things." "They would not hear, but . . . rejected His statutes, and His covenant that He made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He testified against them." It was because they had "left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal," and refused steadfastly to repent, that the Lord "afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until He had cast them out of His sight," in harmony with the plain warnings He had sent them "by all His servants the prophets."

"So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria," "because they obeyed not the voice of the Lord their God, but transgressed His covenant, and all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded." 2 Kings 17:7, 11, 14-16, 20, 23; 18:12.

In the terrible judgments brought upon the ten tribes the Lord had a wise and merciful purpose. That which He could no longer do through them in the land of their fathers He would seek to accomplish by scattering them among the heathen. His plan for the salvation of all who should choose to avail themselves of pardon through the Saviour of the human race must yet be fulfilled; and in the afflictions brought upon Israel, He was preparing the way for His glory to be revealed to the nations of earth. Not all who were carried captive were impenitent. Among them were some who had remained true to God, and others who had humbled themselves before Him. Through these, "the sons of the living God" (Hosea 1:10), He would bring multitudes in the Assyrian realm to a knowledge of the attributes of His character and the beneficence of His law.

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