

CHAPTER 15, GOD'S MESSENGERS

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS PEOPLE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, it does. Israel sank deeper and deeper into the cesspool of idolatry under the royal wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel. They led the people further into idolatry and disregarded the God who had made them a nation. The people of promise had broken their promises. But YHWH is a jealous God who would not sit idly on His heavenly throne and allow worthless non-gods and their followers to go unchecked. So He called prophets who would speak on His behalf and demonstrate that there is no God but Himself. Sounding the alarm, these prophets warned faithless Israel that her unbelief would march her right into captivity.

Elijah warned Ahab that Israel would experience a 3-year drought because of their worship of the pagan god, Baal. The shriveled up land seemed a fitting picture of Israel's desiccated hearts and shrunken worship. Ahab had gone so far as to build a temple for Baal in the capital city of Samaria. Then, atop Mount Carmel, the supposed sacred dwelling place of Baal, Elijah challenged the idolaters to the ultimate smackdown—YHWH vs. Baal. Baal failed to show up but the LORD made a dramatic statement when He consumed the water-logged sacrifice with fire. Elijah then put to death the 450 prophets of Baal. Ahab's wife Jezebel, the Queen of Mean, threatened to kill him so Elijah fled into the desert. Fatalistic, fearful and not without some Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Mount Horeb. God revealed Himself there to Elijah, much like He had done nearly 600 years earlier to Moses at Sinai. He told Elijah that he had kings and prophets to anoint – one of whom was his successor, Elisha. Once again, as with Moses and Joshua, God was passing the baton to the next generation of leaders who would speak for Him.

While the two prophets were traveling together, Elijah parted the Jordan by striking the water with his cloak – another throwback to Moses. As they continued on, a whirlwind took Elijah up to heaven in a chariot of fire. The cloak fell to Elisha whose authority was confirmed when he too divided the Jordan. Similar to Elijah before him, Elisha performed many miraculous feats for the benefit of the faithful remnant in Israel. He promised a barren Shunammite woman a son. When the boy suddenly died years later, Elisha brought him back to life. When the Aramean king sent his troops to capture the man of God, Elisha prayed. He asked God to open his servant's eyes so he could see the angels who were standing guard around them and to blind the Arameans. The prophet then led his captives to Samaria where he asked the king of Israel to prepare a feast of friendship in lieu of execution. This unconventional act of grace established peace between Israel and Aram.

Even with the powerful ministries of Elijah and Elisha, the deeply embedded idolaters remained powerful, numerous, and unrepentant in Israel. God sent Amos, a herdsman from the southern kingdom of Judah, to warn the northern kingdom of Israel that her prosperity, injustice, and sinful ways would soon be judged. He promised them that if Israel did not repent, they would be taken captive. God also sent Hosea to Israel as a living object lesson of His faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. Israel refused to hear the pleas of God to return to Him.

God's holiness demands judgment against rebellious men, but His redemptive love always provides a way of escape. Whether it's a mountaintop showdown, a boy raised from the dead, a vision of guardian angels, or a prophet commanded to marry a woman who would become unfaithful, God is always telling His Upper Story of redemption and compassion through His messengers.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: When you were growing up how did your parents warn you that you were in trouble? Was there a special word or phrase that they used?

1. What is it about Ahab and Jezebel that provoked unprecedented anger from the LORD? How does this relate to the first two commandments?
2. Look up Deuteronomy 13:1-5. Was Elijah correct or too brutal in slaughtering all the prophets of Baal? Why does God take idolatry so seriously?
3. Baal worshipers believed their god made rain and storms, and during the dry season he needed to be brought back to life. Mount Carmel was his supposed sacred dwelling place. What was the point in God taking the battle to enemy territory?
4. Despite a recent, dramatic victory, Elijah was scared and depressed when he ran from Jezebel. Why do the deepest doubts often come on the heels of great triumphs or strong spiritual advancement?
5. Elijah ended up at Mount Horeb, the same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God (p. 207). What other parallels do you discover between Elijah and Moses?
6. Elisha's spiritual insight allowed him to know the plans of the king of Aram and to see God's angelic armies. Are there forces at work in our world today that we cannot see (p. 211-212)? What did this episode teach you about spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:12)?
7. What is the role of the prophets in this chapter? Was their role predicting the future or calling the people to repentance? Does God still send prophets today?
8. Do you see any similarities between the prophecies of Amos and Hosea and our world today? What do you think they would say to America? Our church?
9. Evaluate the prophets' ministries. On what basis would you judge whether or not they were successful? How should we evaluate success in our work for God? How should we evaluate our own success for the kingdom?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 16, THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. The reigns of kings Hoshea and Hezekiah overlapped for about six years. Which king seemed to have God's Lower Story in view and which seemed to have His Upper Story in view? How do you know?
2. God used the Assyrians to discipline his people. Look up Hebrews 12:4-11. According to Hebrews, what should be the outcome of God's discipline? Has this been your reaction?

DAY 2

1. What do these stories of kings and their people teach you about leadership?
2. The Assyrians tried to convince the people of Judah not to trust God. Whose "voice" is most likely to cause you to doubt God? To whom do you listen when you feel surrounded by your enemies?
3. Isaiah lists several analogies that show God's love for His people (p. 227-228). Which ones are most reassuring to you?

DAY 3

1. Consider Isaiah's vision of the LORD in the temple. What made Isaiah so aware of his own sinful condition?
2. Isaiah realized that his whole nation needed cleansing. Write out a prayer for our nation and for its cleansing.
3. God used Isaiah to warn Judah of an imminent judgment. God also provided the promise of restoration through Isaiah. What specific promises (p. 227-228) might bring you comfort in those times that you feel forsaken or forgotten by God?