

June 18 Lesson: God's Servant King

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 18, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Ezekiel 37:21-28

Key Verse:

My dwelling place shall be over them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
(Ezekiel 37:27)

Lesson Aims

- To learn about the illustration of the two sticks and the historical background of the message
- To explore the ways God sought to bring unity to what was divided
- To apply this unifying work in the context of God's reign
- To reflect on the ways we might be tempted to commit apostasy
- To compare the servant king that Ezekiel speaks of with Jesus
- To contemplate how God dwells in us and our life together

Introducing this Lesson's Theme: God's Servant King

The theme for the summer quarter is "the Righteous Reign of God." For a couple of weeks, we have been studying the reign of the One who not only created the universe, but also continues to rule over it. The God who created is still creating, and the goal is to bring about a new creation. Throughout scripture, God promotes the vision of God's reign as a source of hope for God's people.

We sing about this in the hymn, "This Is My Father's World," written by Maltbie D. Babcock in 1901. In the last verse, it says: "*This is my Father's world | O let me ne'er forget | That though the wrong seems oft so strong | God is the Ruler yet. | This is my Father's world: | Why should my heart be sad? | The Lord is King: | let the heaven's ring! | God reigns; let the earth be glad!*"

In this first unit of our Summer Quarter study, we have been exploring the way that the prophets have helped God's people get their hearts and minds around the hope of God's reign. The theme for this lesson is "God's Servant King," and it comes from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet whom God called from among those who were taken into the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century B.C. He was called to give hope to his fellow exiles.

We are going to explore how the promise of a coming King would be used by God to advance a shared understanding of God's reign and build hope among God's people. We will begin our exploration by looking at an illustration that God told Ezekiel to use to frame his message.

The Illustration of Two Sticks

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ Mortal, take a stick and write on it, “For Judah and the Israelites associated with it”; then take another stick and write on it, “For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it.” (Ezekiel 37:15-16)

The two sticks served as an illustration of the divided kingdom that symbolized the decline of God’s people. The high point before the divided kingdom was when Israel was one united kingdom under the reign of King David. His son, Solomon, took it even higher in some respects, but then Solomon committed the sin of apostasy—he allowed his heart to be turned away from worshiping God alone to also worshiping the gods of his many wives (1 Kings 11). Due to Solomon’s apostasy, his son’s rashness, and old tribal animosities, the kingdom was divided into two kingdoms in the following generation: a northern kingdom (Ephraim/Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah).

In the centuries that followed, all the kings of the northern kingdom did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, following after other gods. When the Assyrian war machine swept over the region in the 8th century B.C., the northern kingdom fell, and the people were scattered over a wide region (2 Kings 17). Although a few kings of Judah followed in the ways of their ancestor David and did what was right in the sight of the Lord, most of the kings of Judah did what was evil. Less than two centuries after the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians, the southern kingdom, Judah, fell to the Babylonians, and its people were taken into captivity in Babylon. Ezekiel’s audience would understand the illustration of the two sticks all too well.

In the next two verses, God tells Ezekiel to take the two sticks and hold them together so that the two sticks appear to be one. Then God told Ezekiel what to say.

²¹ Then say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone and will gather them from every quarter and bring them to their own land.

God was going to gather his people who had been displaced by war and oppression. Notice that the scripture says that God will gather them “from the *nations* [plural] among which they have gone... from *every quarter*.” Although Ezekiel was addressing his fellow exiles in Babylon, the scope of the message was much deeper and wider. God was not only going to gather the exiles in Babylon and take them to their homeland, God was also going to gather the descendants of the tribes of the northern kingdom Israel who had been taken from their homeland and scattered among many nations by the Assyrians more than a century earlier.

God was gathering all the Jews in Diaspora. The term “Jews in Diaspora” refers to those who share the same Hebrew ancestry but have been scattered by war and oppression. The term is still used today to refer to Jews who live all over the world, some by ancient wars and persecutions, some by persecutions and attempted racial extermination as late as the 20th century, and some who migrated around the world by choice. Any ethnic group may refer to their members living in diaspora. The word “diaspora” means scattered like the spores of a plant.

Ezekiel's announcement that God was gathering his people came at a time when God's people had been scattered for a long time and over a wide region. This was a very big announcement with far reaching implications. The Jews in Babylon would be gathered with relatives from all over whom they had never met. Ezekiel was announcing a family reunion like no other. Imagine the effect on the Babylonian exiles of such an announcement. It would have been difficult to believe. Believe it or not, this is exactly what came to be when the Persian ruler, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians and let all the displaced peoples in his empire return to their homeland.

Think of what this would do, for someone in this situation, to their sense of identity and their sense of belonging. To know they would be reunited with relatives from all over, separated for over a century, would remind them how big their spiritual family was, and also how important they were. They were, and are, no less than the covenant people of God. Don't you think that God wanted them to be reminded of their shared identity? Ultimately, their story is a part of our story as Christians. We are a part of one big family with God steering a divine destiny.

God had more in mind than just gathering exiles and reuniting God's family. God was righting the wrongs that had occurred in the history of God's people.

22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms.

When the kingdom was divided into north and south, we are informed that it was a delayed punishment for Solomon's apostasy, that it was a reaction against the rashness of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and that it also represented the resumption of old tribal hostilities and rivalries. To sum it up, the divided kingdom was the result of sinful behavior.

So, when God took the initiative to do a new thing, what did God do? God set out to unite what was divided. God was offering forgiveness and redemption and intended to roll back the consequences of sin and division. God wanted God's people to imagine a time when they would be reunited under one king, become one nation again on the mountains of Israel, and remain united forever. The people whom God was gathering were all sons and daughters of Abraham and of Jacob. They were all the descendants of the Exodus generation which was delivered from bondage in Egypt, and they were all descendants of the Deuteronomy generation which entered the Promised Land. God was rewriting the story of all these scattered people so that it would revert to the way it once was and always should have been.

What does the history of division in the history of God's people teach you about division in general? What do you think God desires to gather in our time? What divisions does God want to heal? How do you think this applies to the ongoing work of God through his rule and reign?

Tackling the Problem of Apostasy

Gathering what was scattered and reuniting what was divided would have been wonderful news, but this alone would not address the source of the original problem. God's hopeful vision tackles this head-on.

²³ They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

We have already used the word apostasy to describe when Solomon followed after the gods of his many wives. The root of the word *apostasy* means *defection*. To commit apostasy is to abandon one's faith. When First and Second Kings describes the evil that the kings of Judah and Israel did, it includes a reference to the apostasy they committed.

How did the kings and the people get to the point where they committed apostasy? Did they knowingly abandon their faith? Perhaps they did, or perhaps they did not. Perhaps they did not knowingly set out to abandon their faith. It is very plausible that most people who abandon their faith do not do so knowingly *at first*. I find it hard to believe that Solomon woke up one morning and thought to himself, "I am going to abandon my faith." I am sure that Solomon abandoned his faith, at least in his own mind, *by degrees*.

Not only did Solomon most likely abandon his faith by degrees, he did it by thinking he could hold two mutually exclusive allegiances together. Why not love the Lord, the God of his people, whom he was taught to love, AND follow after the gods of his many foreign wives? A word we use for this is the word syncretism. Syncretism is the amalgamation of different religions.

The first two commandments that God gave to his people through Moses address this. The first is "you shall have no other gods before me," and the second is, "you shall make no graven images." We either worship God exclusively or we do not worship God at all. God accepts no rivals in our affections.

The second commandment, the prohibition against graven or carved images, is closely related to the first commandment. Not only is worshiping idols the same as worshiping other gods, but the practice of making an idol, a material representation of God, reduces God. The practice of making idols to a god and worshiping the idol is the same as attempting to manipulate the god. Whether this is the intention of the worshiper does not matter, because the result is the same. The worship that God demands of God's people is imageless worship so that God remains sovereign in our hearts and minds—free from our attempts to reduce God, manipulate God, or make God a projection of our wants and desires.

It was too easy in the idol worship that the people practiced to make worship a projection of either their sensuality, their wish fulfillment, or protection from all that they feared. The prophets were good at pointing out the fallacy of idol worship. They talked about how, with the same piece of wood, they would use part of it to make an idol and another part to build a fire. You couldn't help but bring God down in this way. They talked about how the idol was made

according to the imagination and craftsmanship of the maker, thereby proving that the idol could be no more than the maker. The person makes the god that in turn makes the person. The prophets talked about how ridiculous it was to make a god they could carry.

Why were the people of Israel and Judah so susceptible in those days to the idol worship of their neighbors? They saw their neighbors praying for fertility, sensual fulfillment, wish fulfillment, abundant crops, victory in war, and such things, and they wanted to improve their odds at life—fear of missing out. They saw the intensity of their neighbors' devotion. The problem was that they were denying themselves the spiritual formation that God intended for them. They denied themselves the privilege of being formed by the one true God who is known through God's Word and special relationship with God's people.

We are more than the sum total of our basest fears and desires. God has a special story to write through our lives.

The good thing about the Exile is that the experience taught God's people about the error of their ways. They also learned about the cultures that the worship of others gods and idols produced. They suffered under their oppression and suffered from their sinful behavior. Their eyes were opened.

God was giving God's people a fresh start where they had the opportunity never again to "defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions." They could be saved from all the apostasies into which they had fallen. God could cleanse them from their unfaithful past. They could again be God's special possession as a people. God desired to be their God. God had never stopped desiring this.

When we explore the idea of apostasy in our time, we must avoid looking at the apostasy of others, and think how we ourselves suffer from our own divided loyalties. What temptations exist for you? What are the metaphorical "idols" you might be tempted to serve?

God's Servant King

In verse 22, God announced through his prophet Ezekiel that there would be one king over all his people. The characteristics of this king are revealed in verse 24.

²⁴ "My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. ²⁵ They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever, and my servant David shall be their prince forever.

When Ezekiel made this announcement, King David had ruled and passed into the annals of history several centuries earlier. Moreover, the last kings of Judah had been deposed by the Babylonians and taken into captivity. The reign of kings had come to an end along with Judah's

independence. Soon, the Persian government would defeat the Babylonians, and the way would be made for the exiles to return home. The descendants of the former nations of Israel and Judah would no longer exist as an independent, sovereign nation until the middle of the 20th century, and even then, as we know, it would not be ruled by kings.

The descendants of Israel and Judah would, however, be a people with a precious heritage and a distinct spiritual identity. They would have some limited self-rule as a vassal state under the rule of the Persian empire, then later the Greek empire, then, still later, the Roman empire. They would be allowed to have leaders handpicked from among them by the empire and installed as provincial governors.

One of these governors, Zerubbabel, would come from the line of David. It does not seem plausible that Zerubbabel would be the one intended by God to fulfill the role of the one referred to as God's servant David who shall be king and shepherd over God's people forever.

So, what are we to make of this announcement of the return of King David? It is in part a metaphor, but it is used to describe a real hope. We go back to 2 Samuel 7 to the promise God made to King David and to the people, which said that God would preserve David's dynasty forever. Of course, God's people did not keep up their end of what was a conditional promise. The condition was that the people would remain faithful, and they were not.

Because God is God, however, the unfaithfulness of God's people does not limit God if God wants to preserve his promise to David and God's people. It is because of pronouncements like the one in our scripture, that the hope of a return of a King, like David but even greater, was kept alive.

I am reminded of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien. In that story, there is a Ranger named Strider who helps protect the shire and is the confidant of Gandalf the wizard. He becomes a member of the Fellowship of the Ring. As the story unfolds, we begin to learn of his true identity. He is Aragorn, the son and true heir to the throne of Isildur. Before his identity was revealed, it had been widely believed there was no longer a living heir to the throne. His true identity had been hidden until he was ready to assume his role as king of Gondor and the lost realm of Arnor. The third book of the trilogy is entitled *The Return of the King* because of the pivotal role he was destined to fulfill in the triumph of good in the battle between good and evil.

The promise of David resuming his throne is the Bible's very own "Return of the King" story. The promised king is not literally about King David himself returning from the grave. The promised king is the promised Messiah of God's people, also called the Son of David. The idea is that this Son of David is waiting in the wings for the day he is to be revealed on the world's stage. Later in the New Testament, people like the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, recognized who Jesus was and called out to him, "Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." He and others were heralding the Return of the King in their midst.

Through the message of Ezekiel, God refers to David as God's *servant* David. God weaves together the image of David as a king with the image of David as a shepherd, which is a specific kind of a servant. It's no mere coincidence that Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd

who lays down his life for the sheep. In this way, Jesus contrasted the way he related to people to the way the religious leaders related to people.

Before Jesus spoke in this tender way in John 10, God had spoken to God's people just as tenderly through Ezekiel in the 34th chapter. In the 34th chapter, God speaks of false shepherds, who care more about feeding themselves than feeding the sheep under their care, who did not protect the sheep from predators, who allowed the sheep to get lost. God promises then to intervene:

“For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15, 23)

Notice that sometimes God says that he himself will fulfill the role of shepherd, and other times, God talks about sending a shepherd, a King in the mold of King David. (Remember that David was a shepherd when he was young.) Think about this for a moment. If the goal is for believers to envision God as their Ruler and to envision God's reign, why talk about any King other than God himself?

We can gain insight into this by going back to when God's people first proposed the idea of God giving them a king. We go back to the prophet Samuel who had been raised up by God to be the people's leader in the time when they were called judges. After Samuel had been leading God's people well for a generation, the people came to him one day and said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” (1 Samuel 8:5) Samuel indeed was old and his sons were corrupt. The people sensed the coming leadership vacuum.

Samuel took an immediate dislike to the idea and took the matter to God. God understood why Samuel was reacting the way he did. God explained to Samuel, *“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”* (1 Samuel 8:7-9)

Both God and Samuel questioned the people's motives in requesting a king to govern them, because their request represented an implied rejection of a more direct relationship with God as their Ruler and King. So, why did God tell Samuel to listen to the people and allow them to have a king if they insisted? God told Samuel to remind the people of the ways of kings and their tendency to oppress their subjects, which Samuel did, but the people still insisted. Why did God allow this? The reason is that God meets his people where they are. Even though a more direct relationship with God as their king was God's ideal, the people had proven they were not capable. So, God set out to make the best of the situation.

The first king, Saul, had all the outward characteristics of an ideal king, but inside he was tortured by his own ambition and insecurities. God told Samuel to begin the search for his replacement, and told him not to look for the outward characteristics, for God looks at the heart. That's when David was found. History would show that David was not perfect, but he had a deep personal relationship with God that made David the standard bearer in that respect. God built up this incredible story around David. As we have been learning, the story is ongoing.

What did God know, that the people, and even Samuel, did not know? Although God desires the most direct relationship with us, God knows that our brains and our hearts need an experience of God that is mediated—something between us and God. If the reign of an ideal King, even a promised King, makes the reign of God more accessible to us, then God uses it. The ideal of a David-like King shares characteristics with us, like being a dutiful servant and a tender, caring shepherd, but this King also points us to God himself as our King. The promised reign of the coming King does not replace God's reign, it extends and mediates God's reign and brings the whole notion of serving God to our level.

This way of presenting the reign of God is incarnational. "Incarnation" means "with flesh." This is why Christians have identified the promise of a Servant King and Shepherd with the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, sent to dwell with us on earth. His gracious life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and his ascension into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father, all show us how he came to dwell with us and how he reigns beside the Father through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the One who is always serving the Father and serving us. No wonder that one of his titles is Son of David.

How have you thought about the connection between Jesus and the reign of God? How do you think the Holy Spirit works in this?

Renewing the Covenant Promise of God to Dwell Among His People

The stated mission of Jesus, the Word made flesh, and the mission of the Holy Spirit is the indwelling of God in the midst of the world. The prophecy in our scripture lesson paints this picture.

²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will bless them and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. ²⁷ My dwelling place shall be over them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore."

The arc of the Covenant Story between God and God's people is about God blessing, sanctifying, loving, possessing, and dwelling in the midst of a people. It is vitally important that we remember this and that we live in light of this. It is also important to remember that this is not just for us. One purpose is that the nations know and see the ways that the Lord blesses God's people, individually and in their life together. When God talks about a sanctuary, God is not

talking about a physical structure. Those on the outside looking in should see our life together as a sanctuary where God dwells. They should see unity, not division. They should see a gathering of diverse people who share the Lord in common. They should see a servant spirit lived out in us. They should see abundant evidence that we are striving to be faithful subjects in the reign of God.

How do you think God dwells in us? How well do people see God dwelling in us? Do people experience the reign of God in our life together? How could we work more closely with the reign of God?

Prayer

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you anointed your servant David to give us a perpetual reminder of the supreme value of a personal relationship with you. Give us constant reminders of your reign and what living under your reign looks like, that we might be blessed as you would have us be blessed and that we might demonstrate to others what blessings that could be experiencing, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forevermore, Amen.

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