

Sermon 8-16-26
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Based on the lessons for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Romans 11:1-32; and Matthew 15:21-28.

Jew and Gentile

The three lessons that were just read this morning range in age from almost 2,000 years old to about 2,700 years old. Yet, they deal with issues that are still with us: Yahweh and His relationship with Jews and Gentiles. For against all probability, Jews are still present in the world as an identifiable people. Where are the ancient Hitites and Egyptians and Philistines and Chaldeans and even Romans? Their blood is interspersed in all those alive today. But they are no longer recognizable people groups.

Modern Ashkenazi Jews have some of the bloodline of ancient Israel through their fathers. But, it's been determined through the genetic study of the female mitochondria that they're all descended from four northern European women. But this is no problem since it has been determined that at various points in history it was common for Jewish men to convert Gentile brides to Judaism. The point is that for thirty five centuries there has been a recognizable Hebrew people. Why?

Related to this question is that for even longer there have been Gentile peoples and all ancient Gentiles departed from the worship of the one, true Creator God. Why?

According to Genesis, every person alive today, no matter where they live or what they look like, is descended from the eight people who came off the ark at the end of the great flood of Noah's time, when all life on earth was snuffed out except for what could live in water, float on water or was in the ark. The eight who came off the ark were deliberately saved by Yahweh, their Creator. They and the generations they spawned after the flood were well aware that the righteous wrath of Yahweh had been responsible for the great flood, and that Yahweh's righteousness was to be feared. Therefore, how was it that subsequent generations departed from the worship of Yahweh so that by the time of Jesus no people on earth worshipped and served Yahweh except the Jews?

The late Dr. Michael S. Heiser pointed out in his work that there is an explanation for this. It hinges on the Hebrew text of the book of Deuteronomy that was found in the caves of Qumran. This is the oldest Hebrew text still existent. And so we read in an English translation that follows the Qumran text, Deuteronomy 32:7-9, "7 Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you. 8 When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. 9 But the LORD'S portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage."

When and where did Yahweh divide humanity into nations? Genesis tells us it was at a place that came to be called Babel. And, here's why. When Noah and his family came off the ark, Yahweh specifically commanded them in Genesis 9:1, "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" Fill the earth. That was the command. However, we read in Genesis 11:1-4, "1 Now the whole earth had one

language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.'"

The very purpose of the city was to keep humanity from being dispersed over the earth. This purpose was in direct disobedience to the command humanity had inherited through Noah and his sons to fill the earth. Therefore, Yahweh's judgments against humanity at the Tower of Babel were the result of this rebellion. The first judgment was confusion of language. That's the big takeaway from Babel. Humanity exists in cultural groups because of language to this day. But there was a second judgment that is not clear from Genesis. It's found in the passage we quoted from Deuteronomy. Yahweh divided us into nations according to the number of the sons of God.

Last week we encountered the sons of God in the 1st, 2nd and 38th chapters of the book of Job. We'll also find them in the 6th chapter of Genesis. The sons of God are a specie of spiritual being created by Yahweh. And because of their name, it sounds like they have a special place in His heart. The question is why Yahweh divided the nations according to the number of the sons of God. Heiser's thesis is that when Yahweh judged humanity at Babel, He in effect divorced us because of our unwillingness to obey His command to fill the earth. Instead, Yahweh placed us under the authority of the sons of God He had appointed for the purpose.

However, the very sons of God Yahweh had appointed rebelled against Him once they received authority over humanity. Instead of leading us to righteousness and the worship of Yahweh, they led us to corruption and the worship of themselves as gods. In Heiser's thesis, this is corroborated by Psalm 82. Psalm 82:1-4, "1 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: 2 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Selah 3 Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'"

What is amazing about these four verses is that Yahweh has taken His place in the midst of "the gods." Who are these beings? Interpreters often make these beings humans. However, that's not what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew is the same word "Elohim" that describes Yahweh Himself. Elohim is like the English word, "sheep" it can mean one or many — one sheep, a flock of sheep. So one Elohim. That's Yahweh. Or multiple Elohim, those are the sons of God Yahweh created.

What's also amazing about Psalm 82 is that Yahweh accuses these gods of not properly ruling over humanity. They have allowed powerful people to run roughshod over the more helpless. They have abandoned the very characteristics that Yahweh is known for — justice and righteousness. Therefore, the psalm continues this way, Psalm 82:5-7, "5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I said, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; 7 nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.'" This is Yahweh's judgment against the spiritual creatures who have rebelled against Him. They are subject to the second death — complete separation from Yahweh because of their rebellion.

The psalm ends with this most intriguing verse. Psalm 82:8, “Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations!” This is a prophecy of what would happen once Jesus came. All the nations would be commanded to give up their gods, goddesses and idols and return once again to their Creator. And they would do so — even to the present day.

This scenario is also confirmed in the New Testament. When Paul addressed the pagan philosophers of Athens he made this argument in Acts 17:29-31, “29 Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. 30 The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Here Paul was speaking against the very idolatry that was so rampant in ancient Athens where they had a temple and statue for every god who had ever been worshipped by humanity. But notice what Paul said. The centuries of idolatry of the Athenians (and by association all the peoples of the world) was an ignorance that Yahweh would overlook. But now that Messiah had come and Yahweh had raised Jesus from the dead, the time of tolerance for idolatry was over. All nations everywhere had to leave idolatry behind and come back to Yahweh. As Heiser puts it, the great divorce is over. Yahweh’s inheritance is once again the nations.

So, let’s come back to Deuteronomy 32:7-9. It specifically said there that when Yahweh turned all the rest of humanity over to the sons of God, He kept one nation for Himself — the descendants of the Jacob who Yahweh renamed Israel. Out of one of the Gentile nations, Yahweh called Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac and Isaac the father of Jacob. The twelve tribes of Israel are counted from Jacob’s sons and grandsons. With each of the founding patriarchs, Yahweh made a covenant that their descendants would be His special people. Therefore, did you notice what Paul wrote in this morning’s second lesson? We read in Romans 11:28-29, “28 As regards the gospel, they [the unbelieving Jews] are enemies for your sake [you Gentiles]. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. 29 For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

What Yahweh’s love for the descendants of Abraham will mean for eternal life has to be interpreted through other verses that we won’t deal with here. However, in this life, Yahweh’s loving promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still valid as Yahweh remains committed in love to His people Israel, whether they are committed to Him or not. That’s why there have been 35 centuries of recognizable Israelites. And it’s the reason why the existence of Israelites and their enemies plays such an important political role even in our present world.

Now, let’s consider the Gentiles. For they are the focus of this morning’s lessons. In this morning’s first lesson we see the prediction Isaiah received seven hundred years before Jesus concerning the Gentiles who had been led astray by the sons of God. Isaiah 56:6-7, “6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant — 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” These words predict that Gentiles will join themselves at last to Yahweh. So, for the last two thousand years more and more Gentiles the world over have been joined to Yahweh through the

evangelism efforts of Messiah's Church. As a result, here we are. You are here today in direct fulfillment of prophecies like this one. For, if Yahweh had not drawn our ancestors back to Himself, we'd still be worshipping Jupiter or somebody. The Word given to Isaiah so long ago is a present day living reality in your life and mine.

Let's move on to the Gospel lesson. The setting for the lesson is that Jesus was tired of fruitlessly arguing with Pharisees. Therefore, to get away for a while, he ventured into the Gentile territory north of Galilee — present day southern Lebanon. Now, it's clear from Matthew, Mark and Luke that Jesus ministered to Gentiles both within Galilee and the Gentile regions immediately around it. Therefore, He was known among the Gentiles. Even though Jesus' plan was to escape for a while, His reputation among the Gentiles followed Him on this trip.

So a woman descended from the ancient Canaanite inhabitants of that region came to beg Jesus for His help. As we read in Matthew 15:22, "And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.'" What's really significant about this verse is what she called Jesus: namely "Lord" and "Son of David." By doing so, she was either ignorantly mimicking the terms applied to Jesus that she had heard, or she knew what she was saying. Let's grant that she knew those terms; knew what they meant; and was convinced by faith that Jesus is both Lord and the Son of David as prophesied in Scripture. If that is so, I think it's a real possibility that she was a Gentile convert to Judaism. And it's entirely clear that news about Jesus' authority over unclean spirits had reached her ear. By crying out, "Have mercy," she publicly confessed a strong faith in Jesus' Lordship over evil spirits. She knew Jesus could save her daughter. She knew who Jesus is.

So now we get to Jesus' curious response. We read in Matthew 15:23, "But he [Jesus] did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us.'" One thing is clear, this woman was very persistent and wouldn't take no for an answer. We see this kind of persistent behavior toward Jesus elsewhere in the Gospels. And it's always to illustrate the same point — the person or persons seeking help from Jesus have come to Him in strong, committed faith in Him.

What is a little unusual in this encounter was the fact that Jesus tested the woman's commitment to Yahweh. And to do so, He used the historic division between Jews and Gentiles. For, as we read in Matthew 15:24-26, "24 He [Jesus] answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' 26 And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'"

Nowhere else do we see Jesus say things like this. For instance, Mark tells us that Jesus freely went twice to the East side of the Sea of Galilee to the country of the Gentile Gerasenes. The first time Jesus cast a legion of demons out of a berserk man and into a herd of pigs. No good Jew would be raising pigs. So we absolutely know it was Gentile territory. The people were so terrified, they asked Him to leave. But Jesus left behind the man who had been delivered and told him to spread the good news of what God had done for him. The second time people recognized Jesus, and brought the sick and possessed from all over the region for Him to heal. Jesus said nothing to them about being sent only for the people of Israel and freely healed them. So, the words he spoke to this woman had to be a setup to test both her and everyone who would hear of this incident ever after.

Deuteronomy is clear. Israel alone is Yahweh's portion of earth's peoples. At the Tower of Babel Yahweh set the rest of the world under the created spirit beings known as the sons of God who then rebelled and led the nations into idolatry. But just as clear are the words given to Isaiah that some Gentiles would attach themselves to Israel. And this woman was one of them. Jesus confirmed this to His disciples and us when He insulted her, by calling her a Gentile dog.

Nevertheless, we read in Matthew 15:27, "She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'" The Gospel narrative tells us nothing about how and when this Gentile woman attached herself to Yahweh. But from her response, it's clear that she had done so. She knew that Yahweh was on the side of any Gentile who would attach themselves to Israel and she made this clear to anyone standing by with her reply to Jesus. Her two words, "Yes Lord" show both her knowledge of the special place Israel has in Yahweh's heart, and her confession that Jesus is Lord. The way she picked up Jesus' parable about the family dogs under the table shows both her great wisdom and the depth of her understanding of Scripture. She could not be insulted by what Jesus said and would not be insulted because she knew it was all true. And because she knew it was *all* true, she did not get off her knees in a huff, but expectantly waited.

Her reward was immediate. So we read in Matthew 15:28, "Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly." To me, it's clear this woman had knowledge of Moses and the Prophets. She had already put her faith in God's Word. And when she recognized Jesus as the One prophesied in the Word of God, she put her faith in Him. She probably also knew Isaiah 49 where it is prophesied that Yahweh will save the Gentiles through Messiah. Indeed. Great was her faith. Jesus could have said of her, as He did of another Gentile — not in Israel have I found such great faith.

Saul of Tarsus, known as St. Paul to Christians, had a most amazing conversion from a violent, Jesus-hating Pharisee into the God-called and ordained preacher of Jesus to the Gentiles. As we saw earlier in the quote from Acts 17, Paul knew from Scriptures like Isaiah 49 that the great divorce was over. Through Messiah Jesus, Yahweh was actively calling the nations back into His family. The reign of the false gods and goddesses was over.

Paul preached the Gospel in the many synagogues of the Jewish diaspora all over the Gentile world. Inevitably his Jewish hearers would be divided. Some would receive Jesus. The rest would oppose the Gospel with an increasing fury.

On the other hand, in most places, the Gentile converts who had attached themselves to the synagogue openly received the Gospel. They, then, enthusiastically invited their Gentile friends to hear the Gospel. Their friends responded enthusiastically. So, once planted, the churches mostly grew from Gentile members.

In Romans chapters 9 through 11, Paul discussed this phenomenon. He drew the following conclusions in Romans 11:11-15, "11 So I ask, did they [the Jews] stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass [rejection of Jesus] salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. 12 Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! 13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. 15 For if their rejection [of Jesus] means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"

Here we see an analysis of the situation that continues into the present. Only a trickle of Jews presently find their way to Messiah Jesus. But Jewish rejection of Jesus means a flood of converts from among the Gentiles, as continues at present.

However, Paul made a subtle prediction. There will come a day when Jews throughout the world will accept Jesus as their Messiah. Their acceptance will immediately precede “life from the dead.” I take this to mean the resurrection of the dead on the Day of Jesus’ return. Yahweh will draw His final family not only from a “full inclusion” of Jacob’s descendants, but from all Gentiles who have the faith of Abraham — a faith that Paul discusses in Romans chapter 4.

The other day as I started up from the final Chestnut Street stop sign to go into the church parking lot, I observed a young Orthodox Jewish guy of about 17 walking on the sidewalk in the opposite direction. He came to the edge of the church property; looked down; and seemed indecisive for a moment. Finally, he crossed the road to the other side — I assume to save himself from any judgment he might incur from being on property devoted to Jesus. We probably won’t live to see it, but Paul predicts that a day will come when such a young man will walk right into the church sanctuary and rejoice in the cross of His Messiah.

Hey out there. Anyone ready yet for a Minyan in this sanctuary? You will be. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.