



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Missiology

Lesson 2 – Missions to the Gentiles in Prophecy

The focus of Old Testament was not on Israel bringing the Word of God to the Gentiles, but on God's word to His people Israel. Even during Jesus' earthly ministry, before He completed His work on the cross, Jesus sent His followers only to the people of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6). But His desire was certainly for Gentiles to be drawn to the God of Israel through the devotion and godly lives of His people. When Jesus cleansed the Temple the second time, He called attention to the words of the prophet Isaiah: **"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves'"** (Mark 11:17, from Isaiah 56:7). Non-Jews were not totally excluded from the blessings of God's people in the Old Testament.

The prophet Isaiah welcomed non-Jews when he declared: **"Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants – everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant – even them 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"** (Isaiah 56:6-7).

When the prophets and psalmists talked about the coming of the Messiah, they frequently implied that the Gentiles would share in His blessings. Notice, for example, how many times all the nations (which include heathen Gentiles) are mentioned in the Messianic prophecies. In Psalm 2 we hear God the Father saying to His Son, the Messiah: **"I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession"** (Psalm 2:8). After David foretold the sufferings of the Messiah in Psalm 22, he described the Messiah's eventual triumph and prophecies: **"All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You"** (Psalm 22:27). In Psalm 46 we hear the words: **"I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"** (Psalm 46:10). **"All the earth shall worship You and sing praises to You"** (Psalm 66:4).

Martin Luther wrote a mission hymn based on Psalm 67, where it is written: **"God be merciful to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us, ... that Your way may be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations"** (Psalm 67:1-2). Psalm 72 even mentions specific nations: **"The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts. Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him"** (Psalm 72:10-11). David prophesied: **"All nations whom You have made shall come and worship before You, O LORD, and shall glorify Your name"** (Psalm 86:9).

In some of the later psalms God even calls on His people to bring the good news of the Messiah everywhere. For example: **“Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day. Declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all peoples”** (Psalm 96:2-3). **“The LORD has made known His salvation; His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations”** (Psalm 98:2). The shortest psalm calls on all nations to praise the Lord: **“Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples! For His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!”** (Psalm 117).

Among the prophets, it is especially Isaiah that describes the Messianic era as a time when all nations of the earth will learn to know their gracious Savior-God, the suffering Servant who went to the cross for the sins of mankind. Non-Jews will also rejoice in the salvation He will bring to all. **“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob.’”** (Isaiah 2:2-3).

Chapters 7 to 11 of Isaiah are known as the Book of Immanuel, for in these chapters we read about the coming of the Messiah, Immanuel (God With Us), a Branch from the family of David. At the conclusion of this glorious prophecy Isaiah foretells: **“In that day you will say: ‘Praise the LORD, call upon His name; declare His deeds among the peoples, make mention that His name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, for He has done excellent things; this is known in all the earth”** (Isaiah 12:4-5).

When Isaiah speaks the comfort of the coming Messiah to the people of Jerusalem in Chapter 40, he also includes the rest of the world: **“The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together”** (Isaiah 40:5). The suffering Servant (the Messiah) is introduced in Chapter 42, and Isaiah says: **“He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles”** (Isaiah 42:1). **“He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands shall wait for His law”** (Isaiah 42:4). God says to His Anointed One: **“I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles”** (Isaiah 42:6). The Messiah declares: **“There is no other God besides Me, a just God and a Savior; there is none besides Me. Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!”** (Isaiah 45:21-22). The Messiah must first comfort His own people that have been waiting for Him, but His blessings do not stop there. He then brings His comfort to all. Isaiah says: **“For the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God”** (Isaiah 52:9-10).

Finally, the Holy Spirit guided His prophet Isaiah to devote a whole chapter to the Gentiles coming to praise the Jewish Messiah, the Savior of the world: **“The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ... The wealth of the Gentiles shall come to you. The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense and they**

shall proclaim the praises of the LORD. ... Surely the coastlands shall wait for Me; and the ships of Tarshish will come first, to bring your sons from afar. ... The sons of foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you. ... You shall drink the milk of the Gentiles and milk the breast of kings” (Isaiah 60).

All these references to sharing the salvation of Israel with Gentiles should have led the prophet Jonah to delight in the command of God to proclaim God’s Word to the Assyrians in Nineveh. But Jonah did not want to call the Assyrians to repentance; he wanted them to perish in their sins. This was Jonah’s explanation of why he fled to Tarshish instead of going to Nineveh: **“I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm”** (Jonah 4:2). Jonah was disappointed that the Ninevites responded to his message with repentance, so that **“God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it”** (Jonah 3:10). But God’s attitude was different. He told His angry prophet: **“Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left?”** (Jonah 4:11).

The prophets Elijah and Elisha, on the other hand, obeyed God’s command to bring the Word of their gracious Lord to the widow of Zarephath, a heathen village, and Naaman, a Syrian captain. Jesus pointed this out to the people of His hometown in Nazareth, saying: **“I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, ... but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian”** (Luke 4:25-27). The people of Nazareth became so angry at Jesus’ words that they attempted to throw Him over a cliff.

In the same way the Jews threatened to kill Paul, God’s missionary to the Gentiles, when he informed them that the Lord had said to him: **“Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles”** (Acts 22:21). As soon as they heard the word **“Gentiles”**, they were furious and demanded that Paul be put to death. They could not tolerate the idea that Gentiles should or even could share in the blessings God had given the Jewish people.

But God Himself was always concerned with the nations of the world. That is why He put the children of Israel right in the middle of the world at that time, along the main road between the two most advanced ancient civilizations: the Egyptians and the Babylonians. He gave Joseph and Moses a prominent place in Egypt for the benefit of the Egyptians. He gave Daniel a prominent place in Babylon and Persia for the benefit of those heathen nations. For this reason, we may very well see Gentiles from Old Testament times in the mansions of heaven.

It was particularly in the days of the later prophets that God directed many of His words to the nations surrounding Israel:

- The Assyrians are mentioned in the following chapters: Isaiah 7, 8, 10, 20, 36, and 37; Jonah 3, 4; Nahum 1, 2, 3; Zephaniah 1.
- The Syrians are mentioned in Isaiah 7, 8, 17; Jeremiah 49; Daniel 11; Amos 1.
- The Babylonians are mentioned in Isaiah 13, 14, 21, 39, 46, 47; Jeremiah 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 32, 34, 37, 38, 39, 50, 51, 52; Ezekiel 21, 24; Daniel 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8; Habakkuk 1, 2.
- The Phoenicians are mentioned in Isaiah 23; Ezekiel 26, 27, 28; Joel 3; Amos 1.
- The Moabites are mentioned in Isaiah 15, 16; Jeremiah 48; Ezekiel 25; Amos 2; Zephaniah 1.
- The Ammonites are mentioned in Jeremiah 49; Ezekiel 21, 25; Amos 1; Zephaniah 1.
- The Philistines are mentioned in Jeremiah 47; Ezekiel 25; Amos 1; Zephaniah 1.
- The Egyptians and Ethiopians are mentioned in Isaiah 18, 19, 20, 30, 31; Jeremiah 42, 43, 44, 46; Ezekiel 29, 30, 31, 32; Daniel 11; Joel 3; Zephaniah 1.
- The Persians are mentioned in Isaiah 44, 45, 46; Daniel 2, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11.
- The Edomites are mentioned in Jeremiah 49; Ezekiel 25, 35; Joel 3; Amos 1; Obadiah; Malachi 1.
- The Magogites are mentioned in Ezekiel 38, 39.
- The Greeks are mentioned in Daniel 2, 7, 8, 10, 11.
- The Romans are mentioned in Daniel 2, 7.

Certainly all these references to heathen nations indicate that God was concerned with all these peoples. If He had not been concerned, He would not have bothered to address them and call them to repentance through His prophets. It is as though God could hardly wait for the Old Testament to come to an end so that He could send His Son to save the world and give the Holy Spirit to His followers so that they could go into all the world and to every nation with the Good News of Jesus' deliverance from sin, death, and the devil.

Among the very last of the prophets, Haggai and Malachi in particular foretold that the Gentiles would share in the victories of the Messiah. God spoke through Haggai: **"Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,' says the LORD of hosts. 'The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,' says the LORD of hosts. 'The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former,' says the LORD of hosts. 'And in this place I will give peace,' says the LORD of hosts"** (Haggai 2:6-9). It was in Jerusalem that God established peace through the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Peace and reconciliation with God were established by Jesus through His suffering and death in the place of all mankind.

Malachi, the last of the prophets, prophesied that the Jewish Messiah will be praised throughout the world by the Gentiles: **"For from the rising of the sun, even to the going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered**

to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations,' says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 1:11).

Questions

1. In what way is the Old Testament different from the New Testament with respect to worldwide missions?
2. Which two Old Testament books refer to missions among the Gentiles?
3. Why did Jonah refuse to go to Nineveh at God's command?
4. How did God teach Jonah that his attitude was not good?
5. Why did the people of Nazareth want to kill Jesus after His sermon?
6. Why is it important that God gave His people the land of Palestine?
7. How do we know that God is concerned about all the nations of the world?
8. Summarize what the prophets Haggai and Malachi say about the coming Messiah.