

## Are You An Israelite?

Living Like Biblical Israelites

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We have heard a great deal lately about spiritual Israel and how the church fits the types of Israel and Judah in the prophecies. Personally, I think that this understanding is one of the church's greatest contributions to the greater church's knowledge in general, because it really does help to keep things together. It is not that we did not understand this before (while we were in Worldwide. So we cannot claim to have discovered this little gem.) But we have explored and expanded it in much greater detail than was ever done before; and it has really opened up our minds to what is going on. I think that it is really going to help us prepare for the times ahead.

We see this clearly in the prophecies—this thing about Israel and Judah being types of the church. That is a no-brainer. I think it is very easy to see that and very easy to apply it. I think we can see it at work in God's providence as well, as last week's sermon explained in the example of Jacob (Israel, as he became) and his descendants—both physical and spiritual. We can see that type/anti-type very clearly.

But have we ever really thought to apply it in Christian living areas? I think that is just a natural offshoot of this. Once we figure out the types (who is who, and what is what), then we would begin to start applying it to how we live. That is where my father was going with the sermon last week. What good is it to know about these things, unless we apply it to our lives? Can we see ourselves, then, in the Israelites of the Bible?

Now, maybe the first thing that comes to mind when such a question is asked is: "Do we want to see ourselves as the Israelites of the Bible?" You know that they are not commended for very much in the pages of God's Word. As a matter of fact, more often than not, the writers of the New Testament especially say, "Don't be like they were!" Let us go to Hebrews 3, and we will see one of the sections where the apostle Paul uses the example of the Israelites and shows us that we should not be doing anything of that nature.

**Hebrews 3:7-10** Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried [proved] Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.'

That is interesting in itself because He taught them His ways; but they never 'knew' them.

**Hebrews 3:11-15** So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'" [And then Paul exhorts the people:] Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Paul's exhortation here is very urgent, very sobering. "Beware, lest you be like them," he says, "as in the day of rebellion"—when they hardened their hearts against God.

The stakes are so much higher for us! It was not just a matter of physical life being lost, or physical destruction; but once we are talking about spiritual Israel (spiritual matters), we are talking about eternal life at stake. If we express the same attitudes and actions as they did—with the knowledge and the calling that we have—the effect is so much worse. Hebrews 4:1 says that we should be **terrified** of falling short of God's Kingdom! Let us therefore *fear* of not entering into that rest, because if we do not, that is it.

Let us go to I Corinthians 10 and see another one of these New Testament examples where Paul specifically says, "Don't be like them!"

**I Corinthians 10:5-12** But with most of them [speaking of the Israelites] God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain [murmur], as some of them also complained [murmured], and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

This section says pretty much the same thing that Paul said in Hebrews 3 and 4. If you think you are doing okay, if you feel satisfied with your spiritual standing, if you feel like your relationship with God is okie dokie—*watch out*, because something is going to be coming. You have become self-satisfied. You have become like the Israelites who felt that their closeness with God (in the covenant) would take care of everything for them, and they could do pretty much as they pleased. So if we find ourselves falling into this sort of attitude, we will end up falling just as Israel fell. Their bad examples are inscribed in black and white in God's Word so that we can avoid repeating those things.

So today I want to pursue this question: Are you an Israelite? You will have to answer that for yourself, as we go through some of the examples that I hope to be able to go through today. By the end of the sermon, I hope that we come to recognize that being an Israelite spiritually is something to overcome. That might sound kind of funny; but it is true. It seems to set up a paradox; and it is an apparent paradox.

Paul calls us "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16. That is perfectly true, and right, and good. It is a positive thing. We are the seeds of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That is a good thing. Elsewhere, we are called spiritual Jews. We are called the children of promise, like Isaac. We are called God's special people, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation. These are fine, proud titles to have—especially when they come from God. They are in a good sense. They are meant to show our place in God's plan—as firstfruits, as spiritual descendants of God's heroes of faith.

On the flip side, however, the church's identity with Israel sets up (for many of us) some of the same spiritual pitfalls that occurred to Israel. Not that it "occurred" to them—they jumped into them with both feet. Some of the same dynamics are present, I mean, because of our closeness to God. Because of some of the situations that are set up we feel that we do not have to do certain things because we are God's people. If we are not careful, they will play out naturally and reap their carnage just as they did to the Israelites. But this time (as I said before) the effects will be so much more devastating, because they are spiritual. And, of course, they will be longer lasting and impact on our eternal life. Taken to an extreme, they could take our eternal life away entirely.

So, if you want a catchy way to keep this straight (this apparent paradox that is set up), you could say, "It's good to be a spiritual Israelite, but it's bad to be an Israelite spiritually." Just about every one of the examples we have of Israel's spiritual condition is bad. But our identity is as a spiritual Israelite; and we should be living as God *intended* Israel to live, not as they actually did in their practice.

Our identity as God's special people and our relationship to Him are noble, and good,

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and wonderful—that we have such a place with Him. But we want to avoid the Israelite 'example' like the plague. As a matter of fact, I could not think of one thing in which Israel was commended. It is hard to find. (Maybe I have missed one. So, if you find one, let me know.)

I have chosen three pitfalls that the ancient Israelites fell into. Some are more obvious, and some are less obvious, in the Bible. I am going to use these as examples of attitudes and behaviors that we need to steer clear of, or overcome—whatever the case may be. If we see them in us, we need to overcome them. If we see that we may have a proclivity toward them, we need to steer clear of them.

I am hoping that this may be a good sermon to get our self-evaluation started, or to get us kicked into high gear maybe, for the Passover—since that will be here in a little over a month now. I began to think of doing this a few weeks ago, while we were in the midst of the so-called Senate trial of President Clinton. I do not think it was much of a trial, because they did not accomplish anything. No justice was served.

But Beth and I were discussing just how much Americans mimic the ancient Israelites. And a lot of this stuff came out in the trial. The way that we love to have leaders that make us happy, because we are prosperous. And we do not care whether they are moral or not. As long as they put dollars in our pockets, we are happy; and we do not care what they are like. We do not mind being lied to, as long as we are happy. And I think one of the reasons why we do not mind that is because it makes us feel good about ourselves. We can say, "Well, look at him. He's a bald-faced liar, and they don't do anything about it."

Israelites have certain proclivities and they come out in their modern descendants as well. Most of us are Americans. We were called out of that physical Israelite way of life. Because of that, we bring those same attitudes and behaviors into the church. We cannot help it. We do not completely repent and overcome everything upon coming into the church. Some of those things linger on *for years*. Some of us fight things our entire lifetime, because we just have that tendency to do those things. They become such ingrained parts of our nature. So, if we have these proclivities in us (I am speaking generally) and if our self-control slips, they can come out in us again. Thus, it is a good idea to review these every once in a while and to see just where they are in us—or, whether we have overcome them.

The first one that I have chosen is the old Israelite one. I am sure you will recognize it immediately, and that is the Israelites' proclivity to murmur and to complain. Since we are here in I Corinthians 10, we will read verse 10 again because this thing about

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murmuring or complaining is one of the ones that Paul picked out to highlight.

**I Corinthians 10:10** Nor complain [murmur], as some of them also complained [murmured], and were destroyed by the destroyer.

That is kind of interesting, in itself. Pull that right out of the context and think about it. He is talking about complaining. And look at the penalty for complaining. They were destroyed by the death angel, is what it says. "The destroyer" is the Greek rendition of the Hebrew words that are used back in Exodus to talk about the death angel killing the firstborn of Egypt. Now, is that not interesting? God thinks the penalty for murmuring was as bad as what He did to the Egyptians, who hardened their hearts against God in not letting His people go. That was the final straw in Egypt.

We do not think of complaining as being this serious a matter—one that God would think to send His death angel to destroy for it. It is very interesting, because we tend to think, "They always do that. He always complains. It's a minor vice." Is it? Not to God! Murmuring and complaining, to Him, is **very serious**. Complaining leads to destruction. It says it very plainly there in verse 10.

And, you know, Americans complain about everything. Listen to any radio talk show, and all you hear is hours and hours of complaining—about something, whatever it is. It does not matter. We complain about our sports teams, like they are really important. Now, to some people they really are important; and, if they have a bad season (or a bad game, or a bad play), they complain.

We grumble about traffic. Oh, and do we grumble about traffic in Charlotte. "Oh, it's terrible!" And it is terrible. I do grumble about traffic in Charlotte. I grumble all the time at the Department of Transportation here in North Carolina. I would like to give them a piece of my mind. But that is just my Israelitish character coming out—something I need to hold back and overcome.

And then, when the lawmakers decide to do something about the traffic, we complain—because our taxes go up, our fuel prices go up (because they put taxes in the fuel price). We complain about usage fees. If they decide to pay for a road by a toll, we complain about that. And then, of course, we complain about every other driver on the road—because we know how and they do not.

We complain about not having enough police on the streets, because we do not feel safe. And then, when they put more police on the streets, we complain about them

being too intrusive—or, that there are too many police.

We complain about poor education. And then we complain because we have to pay the bonds. The last one in Charlotte was nearly a billion dollars or something like that. Maybe half a billion dollars for an education bond to bring our schools up to snuff. That goes for our taxes, and our city taxes, and our use fees, and whatever else. We just never can be satisfied.

We have ultra-fast computers in this country. Intel just came out with the Pentium 3. It is supposed to be able to do a whiz-bang job on the Internet. And then we have people complaining that it is going to allow companies, or whatever, to intrude into the privacy of the users. And we complain because Microsoft has too much of the market. We complain that our computers crash. We complain and say that computers have too much to do in our society—that we do not have enough human control. Then, if our computer goes out for a week or two, we complain because our computer is not up. We never think about how fortunate we are to have use of them at all.

We complain because that special Japanese mushroom is not on the shelf at the grocery store. Yet we never seem to think that we ought to be grateful that we can even get that, today.

I think many of us would complain if we had nothing to complain about! We have to, it seems, find something to gripe about. We are never satisfied, because murmuring is a deeply ingrained part of our nature. It is almost like it is in the genes somewhere. It is really just human nature—not just Israelite. But it seems that, with the Israelite, it is closer to the surface—at least from God's point of view. They always did it, and it always made Him angry.

Let us go back to Numbers 14. Most of the commentators feel that this scene, in Numbers 14, is the one that Paul was thinking of. It may also have been chapter 16. But both have the same theme in it. Of course, that theme is murmuring, with the sub-theme of murmuring against leadership in particular. The one in chapter 16 is the rebellion against Moses and Aaron by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. The one in chapter 14 is when the spies came back from looking into Canaan. Joshua and Caleb said, "Let's go. Let's do it. We can destroy them with God's help." And everybody else said, "No, I'm sorry. There are Anakim in the land. They are too big for us, too mighty. We'd be crushed like flies." And everybody believed the second report.

**Numbers 14:1** So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.

"Ooh. Ooh. Oh, we won't be able to go in." Just think about what that meant. "God's not able to take us into the land." Why not? "Well, these people are too strong." Are they stronger than God is? Are they mightier than God is? Would you bet on the Anakim against God? Obviously the Israelites would.

**Numbers 14:2** And all the children of Israel complained [murmured] against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt!"

They would rather die back there in Egypt as slaves than to come out here in the wilderness—and what? And die? Was God going to let them die in the wilderness? Up to this point, He had provided everything for them. And were they to stay in the wilderness for, let us say, another thirty-eight years, He would have provided for them to do so. And He did! But they would rather die in the wilderness, it says in the next part of that verse.

**Numbers 14:3-4** Why has the LORD brought us to this land to fall by the sword [That was not apparent at all! Think of all the assumptions they were making here.], that our wives and children should become victims? [Boy, what melodrama! "Ooh, poor us."] Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt."

They would rather be slaves, than follow God. They would rather die, than follow God. That is what they are saying.

**Numbers 14:5** Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel.

They understood what was going on. They were probably ducking—trying to duck the lightning bolts that they felt sure were about to come. (I am being facetious, obviously.) They fell on their faces in worship and humility before God, saying "God, don't think that we are a part of this."

**Numbers 14:6-7** But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their

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clothes; and they spoke to the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land.

Joshua and Caleb were here trying to turn their attention to the right things, to turn their assumptions on their head.

**Numbers 14:9-10** If the LOORD delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' Only do not rebel against the LOORD, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread [We will eat 'em up!]; their protection has departed from them [Who was thinking clearly here?], and the LOORD is with us. Do not fear them." And all the congregation said to stone them with stones. . .

"These guys are saying good things. We've got to stone them because we want to feel bad. We want to complain, because it didn't work out exactly like we thought it would."

**Numbers 14:10** . . . Now the glory of the LOORD appeared in the tabernacle of meeting before all the children of Israel.

It is getting pretty bad. God was just about ready to wipe them off the face of the earth. And He would have, except Moses interceded for the people; so He did not kill them.

**Numbers 14:20-23** And the LOORD said: "I have pardoned, according to your word; but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LOORD—because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it.

Their murmuring was rebellion, and the penalty was that they were going to fulfill their own prophecy. They were going to die in the wilderness. And their bones were strewn from one end of it to the other for forty years, because they complained.

Is it not true that even the most uncomplaining among us will complain, at times, about leadership? That is really what the crux of the situation was here. They were not happy



with the way God was leading them through Moses and Aaron. It says that very clearly in verse 2. They were murmuring against Moses and Aaron. And if you murmur against His servants, you are murmuring against God! If those servants are generally the righteous kind, they generally do what is good. They generally follow God's commands. And they are trying their best to lead the people in a way that would please God. Then God takes it personally when a servant is attacked.

I think many of us think that we can lead better than our leader. And, you know what, that might be true, because sometimes God picks for leaders those who are not the best suited for it. They have to develop their leadership abilities over time. And they too have things to overcome. Sometimes they slip. But if they are chosen of God, you have to think of Romans 8:28—*All things work together for good to those who love God and to those who are the called.*

If we believe in God's sovereignty, we have to understand that—if God chose that leader—it was for a reason. And we have to make sure that we learn how to submit and follow that leader without complaining. We do not have to agree, all the time. But we do have to learn to submit without complaining.

Like I said, in this particular case the people murmured at Moses and Aaron, who were generally righteous men. Both of them sinned publicly a time or so. Aaron grievously sinned there at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He allowed the people to talk him into building a golden calf. Blatant idolatry! Aaron was specifically responsible for that. But, you know what? God still honored him as high priest. Could you imagine that?

Could you imagine someone of the stature of, let us say, Herbert Armstrong—leading a Lutheran service? And then God honoring him and still working through him as the leader of His true church? It is hard to imagine, is it not? That never happened, of course. But the point is that, the way God looks at it, there should not have been any complaints. God was working with that man and He would straighten him out. And He did!

You know what? Later on, Aaron himself rebelled against Moses—with Miriam, their sister. And it was for that second time that God told him that he would not enter the Promised Land. And then Moses himself rebelled when he struck the rock. In front of **all** Israel, he sinned—disobeyed God. He got angry and struck the rock, when God told him just to speak to it. And for that, he was not allowed to enter the Land. He was given the same punishment as the rest of the children of Israel, yet he would die there in the wilderness. But God still honored him as His chosen servant and continued to use him to lead the children of Israel. What a lesson!

Think of the heinous crimes of David—sins (not just crimes) such as adultery in the sight of all Israel. Murder of a righteous man, Uriah—a man who would not even go home but slept at David's doorway until he was needed. Quite a man! And then to publicly kill him, which is basically what David did. "Joab, put Uriah in the front of the battle so that we make sure that he dies." But God still honored David as the leader of His people—king and prophet, and a type of the Messiah.

God wants us to learn to submit to His chosen leadership without complaining. When we complain, what we are doing is pointing fingers at God Himself. We are showing a lack of appreciation for God. We are showing a lack of faith, in the end, in His ability to lead. But He is the One who leads Israel. He is the One who leads the church. And He can do as He pleases!

In the end, like I said, murmuring is a lack of faith. It is unbelief in the leadership, sovereignty, and providence of God. If we sincerely believe God is on His throne and directing the affairs of His church (of His nation, of the world, of His purpose and plan), then we will not complain about the situations that He gets us in. It is hard—it is really hard—not to complain, because it is so deeply ingrained in our human nature to gripe.

Look at Paul. If there was anybody who had a right to complain about his lot, it was the apostle Paul. Think about all those perils God threw him into. How many times was he stoned? How many times was he lashed forty times minus one? How many times was he shipwrecked? How many times was he without food? How many times did he have to run for his life because a mob was chasing him?

And all he was doing was preaching God's truth. He was not beating anybody. He was not stabbing anybody. He was not being a disturber of the peace (in the normal sense). He was not being crazy. He was not raping women. All he was doing was speaking the truth. Still, he had to go through all these terrible persecutions and privations, seemingly week in and week out. Notice his attitude. What a wonderful example he is. And, I almost forgot, 'the thorn in the flesh' which God allowed him to have specifically—and then refused to take it away.

**Philippians 4:11** Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.

I think that this is the first memory scripture that I gave my children, because I wanted them to learn it right away. It will save them a lot of grief, if they learn to be content. (I also gave them "Do all things without murmuring and disputing," and we are going to

read that one too.)

**Philippians 4:12-13** I know how to be abased [Paul says. And boy, did he!], and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

It was okay with Paul wherever God led him, in whatever situation He put it, because it was part of God's rule. There was something in it to be learned. He did not need to gripe about it. He did not need to complain. Something in there furthered God's purpose for him and for those who were experiencing it with him. Why complain? He was in the hands of the Potter. Why should the clay jump up and bite the Potter for the Potter doing something to him for his own good? (I was mixing two metaphors—the Potter and the clay, and biting the hand that feeds you. But they both say the same thing.) It is dumb!

If the problem is with a human leader (as it is most of the time, because every human is fallible), you have to look beyond him to God. You have to say, "There's some reason why God put him there. Maybe I should just keep my mouth shut until things work out." And, **if you have to**, (let me stress this) use the biblical means to solve these problems. Use Matthew 18:15 explicitly. I am talking 'by the letter.' Do not leave out any steps. It will backfire if you do not and cause division. I cannot say it more strongly.

Use the means that God provides in the Bible to solve disputes. Go to the person privately. Do your best to be forbearing. Have mercy. Understand the person is human. Give him a chance to repent. Jesus said to Peter (after Peter asked, "How many times should we forgive? Seven times?"), "No," Jesus says, "seventy times seven times." He did not mean four hundred and ninety times. He meant every time that you see proof of repentance.

There will be times when the human leaders make mistakes. But, rather than grumbling (rather than spreading division, rather than causing rebellion, rather than getting the anger of God worked up), work it out—according to the guidelines that God has set down. And be patient, because is not God patient with us? How many times have we offended Him; and He has not burned His bridges to us?

**Philippians 2:12-13** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. [Not with the haughty arrogance of griping and complaining, but with fear and trembling.], for it is God who

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works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Make sure you understand that the reason that you are alive and breathing (and the reason that you are in whatever particular situation that you happen to be in) is because it is God who is working in you both to will and to do, for *His* good pleasure—not your own. Do you think Paul took a lot of pleasure out of the stoning? Out of the lashing? Out of the final beheading? But in whatever state he was in, he had learned to be content—because it was God's will that he be there and go through it.

**Philippians 2:14-16** Do all things without complaining [murmuring] and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless [or, innocent], children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Do you see what he said there? If we do all things without murmuring and disputing, we witness before the world that we are God's children. Is that not what we want to do in our lives?

The second point—the second pitfall of the children of Israel—is their willingness to be misled. This is kind of an interesting one. Israelites have a high tolerance for falsehood. Just look at the President of the United States! The American people are willing to take anything from that man's mouth; and they just eat it up. Why? Because they are fat and happy! He has the highest approval rating ever for a man of perverse and deceptive character.

The polls themselves, I think, are full of deception—even the scientific ones. We have heard that they do not even poll certain parts of the country because their service will bias their polling reps. Can you believe that? I heard of another instance where the person got halfway through the poll, and they had answered all these questions as a politically and socially conservative Christian would answer them. And they were told, "We've heard enough. Thank you very much." They would not even allow the person to get through to the end of the poll because they found out that his political and social leanings were to the right, so he was unacceptable. They pretty much hung up on him. Is that not awful?

And then they parade these numbers in front of us—on the headlines of the

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newspapers, top stories of our radio and television news broadcasts—as *truth*; and we take it! We almost have a perverse "like" of it. It does not seem to make any sense; but it does, if you understand the Israelite character.

Go back to Jeremiah 5. Now remember who Jacob was—Mr. Deceiver. What did he do to get the blessing from his father? He dressed up like his brother, Esau, to deceive the old man (poor old blind Isaac). And his children follow in the same footsteps.

**Jeremiah 5:1** "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem; see now and know; and seek in her open places if you can find a man, if there is anyone who executes judgment, who seeks the truth, and I will pardon her."

God asks Jeremiah to find just one, lonely soul who is willing to execute justice and seek after the truth—"and I'll pardon the whole city."

**Jeremiah 5:2** Though they say, 'As the LOORD lives,' surely they swear falsely."

He is telling Jeremiah, "You're not going to find one." Even if they say, "Oh, I believe God. God is on His throne. He's working here."—They are telling a lie.

**Jeremiah 5:3** O LOORD [Jeremiah says], are not Your eyes on the truth? You have stricken them, but they have not grieved; You have consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to return.

**Jeremiah 5:9-11** "Shall I not punish them for these things?" says the LOORD. "And shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?" "Go up on her walls and destroy, but do not make a complete end. Take away her branches, for they are not the LOORD's. For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have dealt very treacherously with Me," says the LOORD. [They even loved to deal falsely with God—to blatantly tell Him lies, mostly through their actions.] They have lied about the LOORD, and said, "It is not He [meaning, these calamities. "God did not send these things against us. God would not do that." They are telling themselves a lie.] Neither will evil come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine. And the prophets become wind, for the word is not in them. Thus shall it be done to them."

In verse 26, God is speaking again:

**Jeremiah 5:26-29** 'For among My people are found wicked men; they lie in wait as one who sets snares; they set a trap; they catch men. [The traps are not for animals. They set these traps to ensnare other people, for their own benefit—because they are going to get something out of it.] As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich. They have grown fat, [That sounds like how I described America today.] They are sleek; yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked. [They are prosperous; but they have made their prosperity by deceit, by injustice, by all the wicked ways that you could think of.] They do not plead the cause, the cause of the fatherless; yet they prosper, and the right of the needy they do not defend. Shall I not punish them for these things?' says the LOORD. 'Shall I not avenge Myself of such a nation as this?'

This is the second time that He has said this. "Don't I have a right to punish them for breaking My law so blatantly?" Listen to what God says:

**Jeremiah 5:30-31** "And astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land. [This is it.] The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?

"Have you really considered where this is leading you?" God asks. What will be the end of a people who **love** to be spoken to falsely—who love to have their preachers preaching out of their own heads, instead of the Word of God? Have you considered that maybe God will punish for those things? That He will avenge Himself—which is a very interesting way to put it. God will avenge Himself on such a nation as that.

Now, why does God call this loving falsehood "astonishing and horrible"? Those are pretty strong words from our God. Why do you suppose that He takes such a strong line against willingness to be misled? It is because it undermines everything that He stands for! Lies express the mind of Satan the Devil—do they not? Is he not the father of it? He is the great deceiver. God's way (His plan, all that He is and does) is based in truth. Is that not right?

Jesus says He *is* the truth. "I am the way, the truth, and the light." We are told you must

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worship in spirit and in truth. Another place (John 17:17) says *God's Word is truth*. Everything out of His mouth is truth. Deception, then, has no part in God; and it should not have any part in us either, because we are—supposedly—His children, and children mimic their parents.

If we are willing to be deceived or misled, or to use deceit in any form because it will give us an advantage, we have just repudiated God. Serious words! Do you love to be lied to, like the Israelites did? I hope not. Do you put up with the trash of this world's ideas and beliefs because it makes things easier for you—maybe at work, maybe at school? Are you willing to be 'politically correct' in your surroundings because you want to look good to others, and you do not want it to reflect badly, just in case there may be a promotion coming up?

Psalm 15 is "the qualification chapter", according to the way I look at it. I have put that as the subhead for this complete chapter. David says, right in the first verse, that these characteristics (that he is going to enumerate) are the ones that God wants in His children.

**Psalm 15:1-5** LOORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? [Who is going to be in His Family?] He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; he who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the LOORD; he who swears to his own hurt and does not change; he who does not put out his money at usury, nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

It is very interesting to notice how many of those have to do with the truth. Especially this one about "he who swears to his own hurt." That would be the character of people (like the apostle Paul) who are willing to speak the truth—even though they knew that the next thing that they might be aware of could be a rock against the side of the head. Those who will be in God's Kingdom would rather hurt than deal in falsehood—either to use it themselves, or to have it used on them.

Let us go to Isaiah 28. It is interesting that the Protestants use this particular verse (in verse 15) to mean that, at the time of the end, the Jews will make a covenant with the antichrist. Well, I am sorry to say I do not see that. I do not think that is a right interpretation of this verse. It has a much more mundane and much more spiritual application.

**Isaiah 28:14-16** Therefore hear the word of the LOORD, you scornful men, who rule this people who are in Jerusalem, [He is talking to the leadership of the Jews in Jerusalem.] Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we are in agreement. When the overflowing scourge passes through, it will not come to us. For we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood we have hidden ourselves. [Now listen to God's answer to this.] Therefore thus says the Lord GOOD: "Behold I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation. Whoever believes will not act hastily.

Who is He describing here? *Jesus Christ*. What did Jesus say He was? *Truth*. (Keep that in the back of your head.)

**Isaiah 28:17-19** Also I will make justice the measuring line, and righteousness the plummet; the hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters will overflow the hiding place. Your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; when the overflowing scourge passes through, then you will be trampled down by it. As often as it goes out it will take you; for morning by morning it will pass over, and by day and by night; it will be a terror just to understand the report."

People will be terrified to hear that it is even coming, because they have seen it again and again and again—like the waves beating against the beach. God says, "Because you have made lies your refuge, I'm going to send it and send it and send it, until you are absolutely terrified!"

**Isaiah 28:20-22** For the bed is too short to stretch out on, and the covering so narrow that one cannot wrap himself in it. [There is no rest, or comfort, in that.] For the LOORD will rise up as at Mount Perazim, He will be angry as in the Valley of Gibeon—that He may do His work, His awesome work, and bring to pass His act, His unusual act. Now therefore, do not be mockers [This is God's advice.], lest your bonds be made strong; for I have heard from the Lord GOOD of hosts, a destruction determined even upon the whole earth.

That "covenant with death", or that "agreement with Sheol"—I think the best way that we



can describe that is by remembering what Deuteronomy 30:19, says. God says I have set before you this day *life and blessing* and *death and cursing*. And He says, "**Choose life!**" And that is the covenant He made with Israel—and with us. (He has offered it to us.) Choose life or choose death. Pick your side!

And the Jews here, in verse 15, choose death. They made the covenant with death. They made the covenant with cursing. But, you know what? They even deceived themselves about that. God says that if you choose death, you are going to get death—and cursing. What did they say? "We're going to make a covenant with death and none of these things will strike us. We'll be safe because we've made our refuge out of lies. We've pulled the shield over our head of misleading statements." And God is going to rip through it, with His wrath!

You might say that they have covered themselves with false doctrines, fanciful prophecies, Pollyannaish expectations and hopes that are nowhere found in God's Word. They are entirely false. The worst part is that they feel that they can disregard the reality of God Himself and get away with it. They think that God would just ignore their stupid ignorance.

You might want to jot down Jeremiah 7 and read all the way down to verse 27, because, again, the Jews of the time made their refuge in a sound bite, basically. "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these" (verse 4). But God says the temple is *not* going to give you any sanctuary when I come through. I am going to make you like Shiloh, He says, which I completely destroyed because of disobedience.

They said, "As long as we're near the temple (insert, the church), we're in good shape. We can do whatever we want and God won't hold it against us." But God says, "That is a lie. What I want to see is obedience, truth, righteousness, justice, mercy." And it is not there, folks, so He is going to pass through and judge.

For us, it all comes down to knowing (and proving) what is true and good. "Test [or, prove] all things; hold fast to what is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21). But it goes beyond that. It is not just knowing it and proving it, but it is *doing* it. That is the important thing. When we do it, it goes into our character

**I Timothy 4:16** Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this [not just continue believing them, but continue doing them] you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

It is a wonderful promise to hang on to. But you have got to do the first part, to get the second part. He is telling this to a minister. So he is telling a minister to keep preaching the truth—so that those who believe and do (as you are preaching and doing) will be saved.

Point three: The Israelites were apt to test, or tempt, God. If you want a subtitle, they were good at pushing the boundaries. We have to return to I Corinthians 10 to run up into this point.

**I Corinthians 10:9** Nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents.

Now this is a very interesting word in the Greek, this "tempt." It is *ekpeirazo*. Its basic meaning is to try, or to put something to the test. But it has a very interesting synonym (at least, in the English language) and that is the word "challenge"—like you throw down the gauntlet and you challenge somebody to a certain exploit. (Like, I can beat you on a horse, or something.) That is what people do to God, and the Israelites were good at it.

This challenge is not the kind of challenge where you try to see if the other guy can meet it. This challenge is the kind you throw in order to defeat the other person. So it is a test designed to produce failure in the other. Not success, but failure. The commentators said that this is a very intensive Greek term, meaning that it is very emphatic. So, what it is then is trying to go as far as possible without incurring a penalty. It is walking on the edge of a cliff, trying to balance on one leg, while we reach as far as we can over the edge of the cliff to get what we want.

It is like a sheep going up to the edge of a fence, and putting his rump against it, and trying to worry that fence over until it falls. Then he can get the grass that is greener over on the other side—even though the shepherd put the fence up there to keep him from the grass that is greener on the other side.

It is trying to get away with as much as one can, within the law. It can even be willing to *take the punishment* for sin, as long as you get to enjoy it. There are people who are willing to do that.

Now, Numbers 21 is the specific incident that Paul refers to. This is the one with the serpents. What happened here was that the people spoke against God and against Moses. Once again, they were saying that they were going to die in the wilderness.

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They did not have any food, and they disdained the food that God gave them—manna. And so God sent fiery serpents among them that killed many.

It can also allude to Exodus 17. This one is, maybe, a little more interesting from this point of view—about pushing the boundaries. It is interesting (just to go back to Numbers 21 for a second) that the word for "tempting" or "testing," God is not even in that section; but Paul brought it up as the section that he was referring to. Remember he said that God sent serpents among them. They were actually murmuring, and he called that murmuring "tempting God." So these two points combine a little bit here.

Chapter 17 of Exodus is the time when Moses had to bring water out of the rock. Not the time that he struck the rock when God told him to speak to it—but a different time. The people were upset that they did not have any water to drink.

**Exodus 17:4-7** So Moses cried out to the LOORD, saying, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!" And the LOORD said to Moses, "Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you stuck the river [meaning the Nile, and also the Red Sea], and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock [This time he was told to strike the rock], and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LOORD, saying, "Is the LOORD among us or not?"

They *challenged* Him, I think should be the word there, because they challenged the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not? Is He going to do a miracle, or is He going to fail?" And God produced the miracle. (Very interesting.) Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown says:

Their conduct on this new occasion was outrageous . . . . It was in opposition to His minister [Moses], a distrust of His care [God's care, because just the chapter before, He had provided bread from heaven], an indifference to His kindness, an unbelief in His providence ["Ah, God cannot prepare a table in the wilderness"], a trying of His patience and fatherly forbearance.

But you notice that God did not punish them here. He just obliged, because He is a

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great and merciful God. But by the time we get a little further along He says, "Ten times you've tempted me, and I've had it up to here."

Keil & Delitzsch add:

This murmuring Moses called "tempting God," i.e. unbelieving doubt in the gracious presence of the Lord to help them. In this the people manifested not only their ingratitude to Jehovah, who had hitherto interposed so gloriously and miraculously in every time of distress or need, but their distrust in the guidance of Jehovah and the divine mission of Moses, and such impatience of unbelief as threatened to break out into open rebellion against Moses.

I like Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown—"This was outrageous." They had no reason to complain; but they seemed to have this bug in them to try to tempt God, to challenge Him! "Will You give us what we demand?" (An awful attitude.)

If you go to Psalm 78, pretty much the whole chapter is about Israel's sins, and specifically the ones in the wilderness. There is a very important point here.

**Psalm 78:40-42** How often they provoked Him in the wilderness [Provoking God is pretty much the same thing as complaining, or challenging Him], and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power: The day when He redeemed them from the enemy.

**Psalm 78:56-57** Yet they tested and provoked the Most High God, and did not keep His testimonies, but turned back and acted unfaithfully like their fathers.

Then God said that He would destroy them for this.

Verse 41 is what I call 'a definition scripture' (or, 'a definition verse') because it gives you a definition of a biblical term. Here, in parallel clauses, it defines the term "tempting God." Notice how it defines tempting God. "Limiting the Holy One of Israel"—that is how you tempt God. By saying, "God can't do this. He'll never pull this rabbit out of the hat." "He can't get me out of this situation." "My sins are just too brash for Him to forgive." "Oh, God can't do this." "I have a job situation and I'd better just go ahead and work on the Sabbath, because God can't work it out." Or, "I've got to go ahead and eat this pork,

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because...(x, y, or z excuse)." Or, "If I don't go and celebrate Christmas with my folks (or whatever), they're going to disown me. God will never call them for they're just steeped in idolatry. I'd better just do what I can."

Is that not the way that we think? Our problems are just too much for God to overcome. So we *challenge* Him by going out and sinning, because we are limiting His power. So, [we think], "I might as well just go ahead and do this because this situation is absolutely hopeless." Zap! Look out for serpents. God had 'had it up to here' with Israel's tendency to tempt Him; and He sent them off into captivity. He sent serpents among them. He made them die in the wilderness, and because of unbelief, they would not enter His rest.

You might want to jot down Jeremiah 32:26-35. It is the same theme. And Jeremiah says in there that it goes from the king, to the prophet, to the priest, to the man on the street. All of them tempt God, by their evil ways. And so He said, "I'm going to reduce Jerusalem to a heap of stones."

We all lack faith to please Him, is the lesson we should get out of that. We all tempt Him, at times. And if we do not repent of it and start trusting Him in every part of our life, we will end up like Judah and Jerusalem—a heap. That should be a very stirring example, to stir us up to take some action on this and repent and give God the credit for being God. He is the One that created all this. He is the One who put us in the situations. He gave us everything. Do you not think He can get us out of it? A little later on (in I Corinthians 10) Paul said, "Every time there's a temptation, there's a way out of it." But you have got to trust God to get you out of it. Follow Him.

Let us close in Psalm 101. This is another psalm that gives an idea of the kind of character that God is looking for. It is really a messianic psalm—a psalm that only Christ fulfills. "I'll sing of mercy and of justice, Lord, I'll sing to Thee." That is the way Dwight Armstrong paraphrased verse one (page 77 in the hymnal, I believe).

**Psalm 101:2-8** I will behave wisely in a perfect way. Oh, when will You come to me? I will walk within my house with a perfect heart. I will set nothing wicked before my eyes; I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cling to me. A perverse heart shall depart from me; I will not know wickedness. Whosoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will destroy; the one who has a haughty look and a proud heart, him I will not endure. My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me. [Notice, these are things that really only God can do. But we are His children; and we should be following in His footsteps.] He who walks in a perfect way, he shall serve me. He who works deceit shall not dwell within my house; he who tells

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lies shall not continue in my presence. Early I will destroy all the wicked of the land, that I may cut off all the evildoers from the city of the LOORD.

And who is that city? Who is Zion? Who is "the city of our God"? (I think you know the answer.) Only Jesus could fulfill these words perfectly; but, as Christians, we should have them in our hearts and minds—as goals to attain. This is the character we need to have. They are exactly the opposite of these bad Israelitish traits that we must overcome. These are parts of 'the new man' that we are implored to replace 'the old' with, especially as this time of Passover approaches. We can do it! We can put off these ingrained character traits, these human tendencies. Then we can put on the supernatural (not the 'natural', but the 'supernatural') spiritual qualities of the new man. And that 'new man' is the image of the Ultimate Spiritual Israelite—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.