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The Lord God, Israel and the Great Divorce

The marriage covenant is an appropriate analogy to describe our covenant with God as it is this analogy that the Lord himself uses time and again in Scripture to describe His relationship with His people. Despite the Lord's covenant faithfulness, demonstrated over and over again, Israel by and large, would prove to be an unfaithful bride to her Lord. This is not to say that there were not loyal individuals and families within Israel; there were always some. But for the most part Israel could be described as unfaithful in fulfilling the covenant vows. As with Abraham, she would enter times of testing, but unlike Abraham, she would be quick to forget God's faithfulness of the past and fail to trust the Lord for her future. This was the tragic pattern of Israel's existence, destined to be repeated again and again.

This pattern of unfaithfulness was evident from the very beginning, right after she had been delivered from bondage in Egypt. During Israel's escape from captivity, as they stood on the shore of the Red Sea, the Lord tested their faith with a furious and rampaging Egyptian army, flying toward them across the desert. In that moment of duress and trial, the memory of the experience of the great power of their covenant Lord slipped their minds. They forgot about their God. In the terror that emanated from their unbelieving hearts, they cried out to Moses in angry sarcasm,

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, "Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians"? It would have been far better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert (Ex. 14:11, 12).

Note the treachery within this statement. She had been delivered from murderous slavery in order to serve God, but now, in a moment of suffering and duress she was accusing her spouse of wanting her death. It was as if they were saying, "It would have been better for me never to have married!" Yet the Lord, in his grace, would overlook this treachery and use this moment as yet another powerful example of His abiding faithfulness. Israel would not need graves, but the Egyptian armed forces would need lots of them because of a dramatic and a memorable turn of events at the Red Sea.

Israel would celebrate her Lord's great faithfulness with exhilarated dancing and singing, because of this narrow escape from death. However, just as the plagues of God's deliverance were so easily forgotten in times of stress, thirst, terrible thirst in a bone-dry desert would drive the past faithfulness of her covenant Lord from her mind. For three days she traveled in the dry desert heat, without water. Suffering from thirst is tormenting, but their trial would only increase when they stumbled upon water at Marah, only to discover that it was not good to drink. Once again, unbelief would spill out in the form of complaint and angry grumbling. To complain is to question the goodness and ability of the Lord. Just as Adam and Eve doubted the Lord's goodness toward them, Israel followed suit. In response to this treachery of His people, once more the Lord demonstrated His covenant faithfulness by making the water clean and able to quench their thirst. Would Israel learn the lesson of God's faithfulness? Would she rest in the strength and love of her husband no matter what would come their way?

No, the treachery would continue. Like a long suffering and faithful husband, the Lord would continue to provide and protect His wife Israel, who would continue to complain and rebel. The Lord would carry her through the desert, providing water and bread in miraculous and powerful ways. In faithfulness the covenant Lord would lead her right to the threshold of the land He had promised Abraham and his descendants so many years ago. But once again, they would be frightened by what they experienced.

The people in the land that the Lord had promised them seemed too strong for them. Rather than believing the Lord's Word to give them the land, they believed instead that they would surely die in attempting what God had told them to do. Once again, the panic of unbelief overtook them. This time it would be so strong that the "whole assembly" planned to kill Moses and others, who by faith in God's

promise, wanted to obey their Lord and invade the land. Inspired by this rank unbelief in God's gracious power to defeat their enemies, they now planned to murder Moses, and the others faithful to the Lord, as a way to save their own lives. In response to this infidelity of His people, Israel, the Lord said,

How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will these people refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they (Ex. 14:11, 12).

Israel, God's wife, had broken her vows of the marriage covenant since the beginning, while the Lord had been faithful to His vows. However, the Lord relented before the pleading of Moses and thus, He would maintain His painful allegiance to His unfaithful wife for almost another thousand years.

After that one thousand year period had passed, the Lord's patience would run out. His wife Israel had by this time strayed into numerous affairs with many other gods, something that was even rare among pagan nations. Usually, those nations were stubbornly loyal to their false gods, but Israel, in rebellion against the one true God, was more than willing to try any new god that seemed to be promising happiness and security (Jer. 2:10-12).

During the idolatrous reign of Manasseh in 698 B.C., the Lord determined that the breach was irreparable; Israel, as a nation, was now beyond forgiveness under the covenant made at Sinai. Even after Josiah's attempt to restore covenant faithfulness, 2 Kings 23:26 reports,

Nevertheless, the Lord did not turn away from the heat of his fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke him to anger. So the Lord said, "I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, 'There shall my Name be.'"

Just as Adam and Eve had been cast out of God's presence in the garden, so Israel would be cast out of the Lord's presence. The prophet Jeremiah would prophecy, "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries" (Jer. 3:8). Ezekiel would likewise prophecy using sexual metaphors to rebuke

Israel, “Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Since you have forgotten me and thrust me behind your back, you must bear the guilt of your lewdness and prostitution” (Ez. 23:35). And Hosea revealed the Lord’s hot and jealous anger,

Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts... I will not show my love to her children, because they are children of adultery. Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, “I will go after my lovers, who will give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink” (Hos. 2:5).

Israel’s pattern of behavior has been to trust in other gods, many other gods, for her protection and provision. She had lived a life of covenant breaking, and now the Lord Himself broke covenant with her, divorcing His chosen wife. This covenantal relationship was over and a great change had occurred. The writer of 2 Kings described the Lord as casting Israel out of His presence, while Ezekiel, who was with the exiles in Babylon, described this tragic event in another way. He, saw in a vision of the temple “the glory of the Lord depart from over the threshold of the temple” (Ez. 10:18). The Lord was casting the Israelites out of his presence by leaving them. No longer could the Lord bear to have His name slandered by His unfaithful wife. No longer could he tolerate her flagrant affairs and her lewd promiscuity. He was leaving and she would be left alone. She would face bitter and shameful destruction at the hands of those who never really loved her. She would go the way of her desires and she would reap the misery of her lust for others.

However, Israel was not left without hope, because the Lord promised He would return one day. And, after about 600 years, He would return. The Lord had made promises to Abraham and his descendants and despite the unfaithfulness of His wife, Israel, the Lord remained true to His Word. The promise to Abraham would be fulfilled and he would have a people, even a great nation. That great nation would have their land and all the peoples on earth would indeed be blessed through Abraham’s seed. The Lord would return, and when He returns, He would be offering forgiveness for His repentant wife. The Old Covenant was broken, but He would start all over again with a New Covenant and a spotless Bride.