

Trapped

On Sunday, we explored the story of the fall of Israel to the Assyrians – and asked what God wants us to learn from it about our own lives.

1. Warm-up question: At the outset of the sermon, Jeff reminded us how terrible it feels to be trapped. He described being pinned to the ground and held down, being closed in coffin with insects, and being in a nightmare where you can't run. Tell us about a time in your own life when you were physically trapped. What did that feel like?

2. In recent weeks, we've been tracing the history of ancient Israel as recorded in the Old Testament. We saw how the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt and gradually made their way into the Land of Promise. They originally organized themselves as a loose confederation of tribes, but eventually formed a united monarchy that gave rise to King David. Under David, Israel reached its zenith; they were finally living into Abraham's dream that his descendants would become a great nation that blessed the entire earth. But not long after David's reign, civil war divided the nation between north and south. The north continued to be called Israel or sometimes Samaria. The south was called Judah. The subsequent kings of both north and south were pretty messed up. Through the prophets, God warned the people of Israel to change their ways or face disaster, but they didn't listen, which brings us to today's story. Read II Kings 17:1-18.
 - a. Verse 6 tells us that the king of Assyria "carried the Israelites away to Assyria." In other words, much of the population of Israel (i.e., the north) was taken captive, forcibly relocated to Assyria. Foreigners brought in to Israel to replace them. Imagine if the United States was invaded by Russia and your family was forcibly relocated to Russia. How might that affect you and your family? How would it feel?
 - b. Has life ever forced you to go someplace you didn't want to (literally or metaphorically)? What happened? How did that feel?
 - c. Verse 7 says Israel was forced into exile "because the people of Israel sinned against the Lord." Verse 13 says, "The Lord warned Israel . . . by every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments.'" Why do you think the Israelites didn't heed these warnings?
 - d. Verses 16-17 tell us that before their exile many Israelites drifted away from the true God and turned to fertility gods like Baal. As part of their fertility religion, they sometimes "made their sons and daughters pass through the fire." That means they sometimes offered a child as a burnt offering to Baal. What might have motivated them to do such a thing? In our own time, have you ever seen parents sacrifice their children for their religion?

3. When we read a Bible story like the foregoing, the question becomes: What does all this mean for us? What are we supposed to learn from it? Here's what Jeff heard

God saying to him through it: **Negative behavior patterns, long pursued, have heartbreaking consequences.** God sends prophets to warn us. God sends circumstances to wake us up. But change is hard because, above all else, we are creatures of habit.

- a. Studies show that at least 50% of our daily activities are driven by habits, i.e., actions taken without making any conscious decision. When you hear that statistic, how does it make you feel? Is it a good or bad thing?
 - b. What's something you do every day out of habit?
 - c. Habits are powerful. Good habits are powerfully good for us; bad habits are powerfully bad. Jeff gave the example of how he needs to change his eating habits to reduce his A1C. Is there something about your health that you need to address? Are you doing it? If not, what holds you back?
 - d. Based on the story of Israel, if we ignore the advice of our doctors (the prophets) and the warnings of our circumstances (medical tests), what lies ahead for us? So why is it so hard for us to change?
4. When we find ourselves in difficult spots, our natural tendency is to want God to swoop down and bail us out with a miracle. Suppose, for example, our finances are a mess, so we ask God to let us win the lottery. Sometimes miracles happen, but usually God says no. Why? God could do everything for us and it would be so easy. Why doesn't God intervene more often to bail us out? As Christians, do we have a tendency to rely too much on prayers for miraculous intervention?
 5. Bad habits don't just affect our outward behavior, they also impact our thoughts. Habitual negative thought patterns can be devastating. We all have our points of weakness. What habitual negative thought pattern do you need to replace?
 6. Jeff suggested three steps for getting out of captivity to our negative thoughts and behaviors, so we can dwell in our own personal Land of Promise:

Accept Responsibility – I may be the victim of circumstances beyond my control, but I always get to decide how to respond to those circumstances.

Relentlessly Practice a new, more positive pattern. (Try/fail, try/fail, until you succeed.)

Expect the Grace and Power of God to be with you as you practice owning your power. (Remember the story of the blind boy whose father was always with him.)

- a. Which of these three steps most speaks to you and why?
- b. As you look across your life as it stands right now, what's the one thing you most need to change? Are you willing to own it? Are you willing to tackle it?