

"I LIVE IN A HIGH AND HOLY PLACE, BUT ALSO WITH HIM WHO IS CONTRITE AND LOWLY IN SPIRIT... ISAIAH 57:15

TESTING TIME



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Testing Time for Israel

With the arrival of Jesus, it's decision time for Israel. Do they want to enjoy God's blessing again, or don't they? Right back at the beginning, God said, I'll give you the promised land, but if you ignore me I'll scatter you around the nations. Then, *if* you turn back to me with all your heart and soul, I'll bless you again, and re-gather you... and change your hearts! That's a big "if."

During the hundreds of years that followed, the prophets had a similar message.

First, look back at **Isaiah 39:5-7, and 40:1-5**. God promises a time of punishment, followed by restoration.

- What is the "context" of the "voice crying out in the wilderness"?
- What's the purpose of the "roadworks"? (Compare with **Isaiah 57:14-19**.)

The "smoothed road" is the road made ready for repentant Israel to return to the promised land. Isaiah says, take any obstacles out of the way, because God is ready to restore his contrite people - those who are "*lowly in spirit*." (Is 57:15) (Keep that thought in mind for when we get to the Sermon on the Mount!)

The problem is, however many bumps are taken out of the road to repentance, it's not always popular! The prophet Malachi (right at the end of the Old Testament) picks up on Isaiah's promise of one who will prepare the way for the Lord... but points out that his arrival will mean both good news and bad news for Israel.

Read Malachi 2:17-3:5.

- Describe Malachi's Israel.
- Who is it that the "messenger" is preparing the way for?
- The Israelites say they desire the coming of the messenger promised by Isaiah. But what surprise is in store for them?

Read Malachi 4:1-6... the last words of the Old Testament.

- Who will come before the day of God's judgement on Israel?
- What two types of Israelites will there be at this time? What two outcomes will they face?

Background Briefing

Elijah was the great prophet of God's judgement in the early days of Israel, famous for the great line "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him." In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is described as "a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." Malachi says there's going to be a new Elijah, before the Lord himself comes. With those thoughts in mind, let's meet John the Baptist...

Read Matthew 3:1-12.

h. According to what we've just read from Isaiah and Malachi, what's going on here?

i. What's the significance of John's costume? (v4)

j. What two kinds of Israelite does John's desert baptism attract?

Where is the confidence of the Pharisees and Sadducees placed?

What are they lacking?

k. Who does John point forward to, and what will be the effect of his ministry?

What part of the Old Testament do you think John is drawing his ideas from?

With the arrival of Jesus, what does the future hold for Israel?

Clearly, being "religious," and being zealously devoted to the "letter of the law" and their Abrahamic ancestry isn't enough. In the words of Moses, Israel had to turn back to God with all their "heart and soul" before they'd be blessed and have "circumcised hearts." The announcement of the arrival of Jesus is both good news and bad news. Good news for the contrite... because Jesus brings the Holy Spirit. Bad news for the proud... because he comes to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Jesus Baptised



l. Read **Matthew 3:13-17**. How does the fact that Jesus has been portrayed so far as the "true remnant" of Israel, and as "Israel being called out of Egypt" help make sense of his baptism?

m. Read **Ezekiel 36:24-28**. How is Jesus again standing in the place of Israel?

Jesus Tested

Read **Deuteronomy 8:1-3**. Moses has led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, but they have refused to obey God - so God orders them to spend 40 years in the wilderness before they enter the promised land.

n. What's the purpose of this time in the wilderness? (v2)

o. How did God show his continued care for Israel during the time of testing?

p. What was Israel meant to learn? (v3)

Sadly, Israel failed under pressure! They refused to trust God, they constantly grumbled against him.... and a whole generation failed to enter the promised land.

Now read Matthew 4:1-11.

q. How long does Jesus spend in the wilderness? What does it remind you of?

r. From verse 3 and 4 (and Dt 8) what has Jesus learned that Israel failed to grasp?

Satan continues to entice Jesus with offers of earthly power and glory. Jesus continues to answer with words from Deuteronomy.

s. How does his final response to Satan in verse 10 highlight the contrast between Jesus and Israel?

Where the old Israel failed, Jesus succeeds. Here at last is one who can stand against Satan and win. Here at last is one who will serve God “heart and soul.” Here at last is the long awaited ruler of God’s kingdom. And it’s not the proud, it’s not the “religious elite” who are invited to join in. It’s the humble of heart... the “contrite.”

What place do people like us have in this Kingdom? How do we become part of it?

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