An Idolatrous People Receive Judgment

Summary and Goal
Israel was a nation that had received many beautiful promises from God, but God had also promised that if they forgot Him and went after false gods and became like the other nations, there would be consequences. In accordance with His character and glory, God always keeps His promises, both those of blessing and those of judgment. In this session, we will see the consequences of Israel’s idolatry. Though God had been good to them and warned them about their evil ways, they still persisted in their sin. Israel had seen God’s glory through His blessings, and now they would see it in His judgment.

Session Outline
1. Idolatry results when people fail to see God’s goodness (2 Kings 17:6-12).
2. Idolatry prevents people from heeding God’s warnings (2 Kings 17:13-17).
3. Idolatry leads people to experience God’s discipline (2 Kings 17:18-20).

Background Passage: 2 Kings 17

Session in a Sentence
God’s love for His people leads Him to warn them of their idolatry and to discipline them so that they might repent.

Christ Connection
The people of Israel sinned against God and worshiped idols. God warned them to turn from their evil ways and obey Him, but they refused and were disciplined by Him. Israel’s rebellion reminds us of our idolatry and need of Jesus, who perfectly obeyed God and took our punishment upon Himself.

Missional Application
Because Jesus has revealed Himself to us as our greatest treasure and source of true joy, we seek to identify and put away the various idols in our lives to show others the goodness of God.
Group Time

Introduction

READ: Use the paragraphs in the DDG (p. 66) to raise the idea of “hedging your bets” in finances. Then connect this to Israel’s spiritual diversification, which resulted in their destruction.

People like to “hedge their bets,” especially in the realm of finances: invest a little bit here, throw some cash into that option, save a few resources for this venture. The idea is to spread it all around. That way if you take a loss in one area, it doesn’t devastate you. There’s an opportunity to stay afloat and possibly recover what you lost. This diversification seems like a wise way to invest your money.

The people of Israel also sought to “hedge their bets,” looking for other sources of security and support rather than throwing all of their faith and trust in with God and believing that He alone could save them. But their spiritual diversification was unwise, resulting in disaster in all areas of life.

• They paid some tribute to Assyria. They also sent some letters to Egypt in hopes of gaining support there.
• They worshiped Yahweh. They also bowed down to Baal and praised Asherah.
• The people of Israel didn’t think God alone could save, but maybe if they spread out their faith in every direction they could buy their protection and not take too great of a loss.

SAY: Israel was going to learn the hard way that you cannot halfheartedly serve God. He wants all of our hearts and will stop at nothing to show us that everything else is loss. Israel faced disaster at her own hands so that she could discover that the only hope is to put all hope in God.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways people try to diversify their trust in things other than God? (participating in other religions and religious practices; doing good works; giving to charity; working hard to look good to others)

SUMMARIZE: In this session, we will see the consequences of Israel’s idolatry. Though God had been good to them and warned them about their evil ways, they still persisted in their sin. Israel had seen God’s glory through His blessings, and now they would see it in His judgment.

For session-by-session training videos, please visit MinistryGrid.com/GospelProject.
For additional teaching options and other resources, please visit GospelProject.com/additional-resources.
Point 1: Idolatry results when people fail to see God's goodness (2 Kings 17:6-12).

READ 2 Kings 17:6-12 (DDG p. 67).

6 In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria. He deported the Israelites to Assyria and settled them in Halah, along the Habor (Gozan’s river), and in the cities of the Medes.

7 This disaster happened because the people of Israel sinned against the LORD their God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt and because they worshiped other gods. 8 They lived according to the customs of the nations that the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites and according to what the kings of Israel did. 9 The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD their God that were not right. They built high places in all their towns from watchtower to fortified city. 10 They set up for themselves sacred pillars and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every green tree. 11 They burned incense there on all the high places just like the nations that the LORD had driven out before them had done. They did evil things, angering the LORD. 12 They served idols, although the LORD had told them, “You must not do this.”

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 67) to explain why the Israelites had rejected the goodness of God in disobeying His good law. Connect this to the sin of Adam and Eve, and apply this to the hearts of your group members.

All the commands that God had given His people were good and wise, but the Israelites disobeyed them. Rather than trusting that their greatest joy and fulfillment was found in obedience to God and His law, His people sought out their own ways. Their hearts were set on being satisfied, as are all our hearts, but they pursued idols, nations, and evil that would never satisfy. Only our good God can satisfy the desires of our hearts.

- The Israelites, like us, always sought what they believed was their greatest joy. If they were turning away from the commands of God, it was because they thought His commands were keeping them from more joy, just like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. So they built places for their false worship everywhere. They sinned with their idolatry because they thought it would satisfy them and bring joy.

Application: If we look at the commands of God in Scripture and think we have to go outside of them to find joy, we are revealing that our hearts are the same as the heart of Adam and the hearts of Israel. “God must be holding out on us,” we think. “There is joy to be had, but He is attempting to keep us from it with all of these burdensome rules.” We thus are willing to work hard and do just about anything to get that joy. But when we believe these lies, we, like Israel, are forgetting the goodness of our God. He will only give us exactly what is best. His Word is a boundary to hedge us in for our joy, not keep us from our joy.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How have you seen people disobey God’s good commands in a fruitless attempt to find their greatest joy? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 67) to show the distinction of Israel’s status before God. Work with your group to identify the ways God had blessed Israel (i.e., covenant, law, etc.), which made them more culpable and thus more deserving of judgment than other nations.

All the nations of the world, such as Egypt and Assyria, were full of sinners before God and deserving of His wrath, which eventually came. Yet God had never revealed His law to these other nations or made a covenant with them. But Israel? God had blessed them uniquely. They were His people, and He was their God (Ex. 6:7). He had given them His covenant and His law. How much more did they deserve the full wrath of God when they had been shown so much more clearly who He was and yet disobeyed!

• God had made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their forefathers.
• God had revealed Himself in power when He redeemed Israel out of the hand of Pharaoh in Egypt.
• God had given Israel His law and His requirements for worship.
• God had shown them His goodness and steadfast love in the promised land.
• God had given Israel kings (a few good ones, at least) and prophets to lead and correct them.

EXPLAIN: This serves as a warning to those to whom God’s gospel has been revealed today. Those who have been told the news of His great gospel, who have enjoyed the fellowship within the body of Christ, who have sat under the teaching of the Word, and who have learned of His grace to sinners in Christ have been blessed by God. To reject this blessing would make one much more culpable and deserving of God’s wrath than those who have never heard of His grace in Christ, for he or she has not only rejected God’s general revelation but also His special revelation (see Heb. 6:4-6). May we hold tight in faith to our good God and rejoice in His blessings.

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways God has revealed His goodness to you? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)
**Point 2: Idolatry prevents people from heeding God’s warnings (2 Kings 17:13-17).**

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read 2 Kings 17:13-17 (DDG p. 68).

13 Still, the Lord warned Israel and Judah through every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commands and statutes according to the whole law I commanded your ancestors and sent to you through my servants the prophets.”

14 But they would not listen. Instead they became obstinate like their ancestors who did not believe the Lord their God. 15 They rejected his statutes and his covenant he had made with their ancestors and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves, following the surrounding nations the Lord had commanded them not to imitate.

16 They abandoned all the commands of the Lord their God. They made cast images for themselves, two calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed in worship to all the stars in the sky and served Baal. 17 They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire and practiced divination and interpreted omens. They devoted themselves to do what was evil in the Lord’s sight and angered him.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 68) to highlight the grace of God’s command for His people to repent. Note why this command, which is included in the gospel proclamation, hurts people’s pride.

Many stories throughout the Old Testament describe the anger of the Israelites when the prophets showed up with their messages of God’s will. Prophets were threatened, imprisoned, and even killed because their words spoke against the hearts and actions of the people to whom they were speaking. But each time they came, it was always grace. In love, God was pointing out the sin of His people so that they could see it and repent.

- God’s call to repent is offensive to the person who has decided for himself what is best. It is difficult for the stubborn heart to hear that there is no hope of saving itself. One reason why idolatry is so dangerous is because it makes grace offensive. The heart of the idolater believes his or her efforts earn the favor of a god, and this is antithetical to the grace of the one true God.

- The gospel is an offensive message to a prideful heart. The message of the cross demands that you give up any hope of finding satisfaction and joy in any other thing. The gospel cries that your sin is great and that all the idols you’ve placed your trust in are worthless. Yet to hear these words is grace. It is always grace to know that you have placed all of your hope in the wrong thing and that there is still an opportunity to turn and trust in Jesus.

**Commentary:** Examples of Prophets Rejected: Moses and Joshua were threatened with stoning for their efforts to lead the people into the promised land (Num. 14:10). Elijah was threatened with death by Jezebel for having slaughtered the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19:1-2). Micaiah was imprisoned by King Ahab for prophesying a message of defeat and death to the king (1 Kings 22:17-28).
INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some reasons people find it difficult to repent of their sin?
(pride; repentance involves confession to God of your wrongdoing; repentance may involve confession of your sin to others; it would mean giving up your personal sovereignty over the desires of your heart)

PACK ITEM 9: THE DIVIDED KINGDOM: Pass out to your group members copies of this handout, which show the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel. Use the timeline of Israel’s evil kings and the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 68) to show that while God may delay judgment for prolonged periods, He will nonetheless judge sin eventually.

For more than two hundred years, the Lord had allowed His people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel to live in the promised land as their own nation, though nearly the whole time they had been engaged in idol worship. Israel must have thought that the day of reckoning for their sin would never come: “Surely there will be more patience. Perhaps God has forgotten or doesn’t notice.” But Israel was a land of fools. The days of God’s patience would end. Apart from sincere repentance, judgment was coming.

- King Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom, set up two golden calves in Israel to keep his people from going to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:25-33). King Ahab set up Asherah poles and altars to Baal for his wife Jezebel (1 Kings 16:29-33). Through all this, God had patiently held out His hands to a disobedient and contrary people (see Isa. 65:2; Rom. 10:21). But they had not turned from their idolatry.

- The apostle Peter addressed the questions people have about the delay in God’s judgment: God is patient, but sin will be judged (2 Pet. 3). Either our sins have already been paid for on the cross of Christ and we honor that in regular repentance of sin or the coming day of judgment will be for us a day of wrath.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 68).

Sin as Idolatry: In Scripture, idolatry usually refers to bowing down to a statue made of wood or gold, worshiping created things instead of the Creator. But idolatry can take on more subtle forms: a seeking of approval, security, power, pleasure, etc.

Essential Doctrine “Sin as Idolatry”: Sin is not only a physical act of rebellion against God, such as lying or stealing, but it is also a matter of the heart. The physical displays of sin are the fruit of what has been birthed in the heart of a person (Matt. 15:10-20). In Scripture, idolatry usually refers to bowing down to a statue made of wood or gold, worshiping created things instead of the Creator. But idolatry can take on more subtle forms: a seeking of approval, security, power, pleasure, etc. We can diagnose the idolatry of our heart by examining the areas where the desires of our heart have turned into idolatrous demands (Jas. 4:1-2).
Point 3: Idolatry leads people to experience God’s discipline (2 Kings 17:18-20).

READ 2 Kings 17:18-20 (DDG p. 69).

18 Therefore, the Lord was very angry with Israel, and he removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah remained. 19 Even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God but lived according to the customs Israel had practiced. 20 So the Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel, punished them, and handed them over to plunderers until he had banished them from his presence.

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 69) to emphasize the effect of separation that sin has on humanity’s relationship with God. Also explain how Jesus on the cross repaired that relationship for eternity for those who believe in Him.

The earthly consequence of Israel continuing in sin against God was exile at the hands of the Assyrians. But when their discipline is framed in terms of removal from God’s presence (v. 18), we begin to understand the spiritual significance of sin. Sin had built up a wall between Israel and God. Sin had robbed them of the only thing that could truly satisfy the longing of their hearts—God Himself—so the Lord handed them over to what they wanted—separation from Him.

• When Adam and Eve sinned against God in the garden of Eden by choosing to obey their desires over God’s commands, they were removed from His intimate presence in the garden (Gen. 3). Sin prevents us from being able to enjoy the fellowship with God that we were created for.

• Jesus went to the cross knowing He would take upon Himself the punishment of sin so we could be reconciled to the Father. He experienced God’s wrath against sin and cried out, “Why have You forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46; Ps. 22:1) so that we would never have to know the eternal desperation of separation from our Creator. Those who are in Christ by faith will never be removed from God’s presence.

Commentary: What are the results of sin for the believer? There are no eternal consequences for the sins of those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1). But there are earthly and temporary consequences to our sins, and these are God’s discipline of His children. As a consequence of sin, our experience of the nearness of God is hindered and disrupted so that we would repent and be restored to full fellowship with Him (see Heb. 12:7-11; 1 Pet. 3:7).
INSTRUCT: Ask group members to use the space in their DDG (p. 69) to reflect on their present experience of the presence of God in their life. Group members may draw an illustration or respond with words, if they so choose. Have some pencils or pens ready for those who need them. Encourage group members to consider the reasons for their response (examples: God’s faithfulness; living by faith in Christ; unconfessed sin; unsaved) and to contemplate what they need to do or who they need to talk to.

How would you describe your present experience of the presence of God in your life?

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 69)

The people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah were sinning against God in the same way as the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Judah was just as deserving of judgment from the Lord, but God withheld judgment from them at this time. As the people of Judah watched Israel undergo the consequences from the Lord for their idolatry, it should have served as a wake-up call to them, and to some degree, it did. But soon judgment would also come for Judah for their own commitment to rebellion against the Lord.

Application: As we live out our faith within the family of God, we might see up close as our brothers and sisters continue in sin and experience discipline from the Lord. In response to this, we must pray for their repentance (1 John 5:16). And rather than continuing blindly in our own sin, we ought to be awakened to the truth that sin is serious business and we too must repent in light of our own experience of the Lord’s discipline. Our heavenly Father is too just and too loving to let us continue in sin. Plus, if we find ourselves continuing in patterns of sin apart from regular occasions of repentance, then we have grounds to wonder whether or not we are truly among God’s people, those who have been born again and enabled to walk in obedience to God’s statutes (see Deut. 30:6; Heb. 10:26-31).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

What are some ways God disciplines His people to lead them to repentance? (God will allow natural consequences to follow from people’s sin; God convicts the hearts of His people through the work of the Holy Spirit; God works through believers in the church to confront and correct His children; God will bring private sins to light)
EXPLAIN: When we look at the disaster that came upon Israel, does it make us thank God for His grace to them? Rather than allow Israel to continue in sin and bow down to idols, God brought His heavy hand of discipline against them. The Israelites lost their land, homes, and many lives. But how much worse would it have been if God had done nothing and allowed His people to continue in their sin without any effort to turn them back? When we look at our own lives, what do we hope God would be willing to do to keep and preserve us? Any time God brings discipline into our lives, He is treating us as children; He is loving us with His gracious, refining love so that we will turn away from what is worthless and turn toward the only One who is worthy.

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 70), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because Jesus has revealed Himself to us as our greatest treasure and source of true joy, we seek to identify and put away the various idols in our lives to show others the goodness of God.

- Where in your life do you see idolatry preventing you from experiencing the blessings of obedience through faith in Jesus Christ?
- In what ways can your group/church grow in helping each other to turn away from idolatry?
- Whom will you pray for and approach to point out the short-lived satisfaction of idolatry and to share the gospel of Jesus?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, thank You for caring for us in Your omnipotent love, which knows that nothing besides You can satisfy our hearts. Help us not to trust in idols and instead to resist sin just as Your Son, Jesus, did. We pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit we would call others to repent from idolatry and to believe in the gospel of Jesus. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 71-73), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 74) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Daily Study devotions in the DDG (pp. 71-73) will help group members get into God’s Word and study it for themselves. Encourage One Another (p. 74) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 71-73) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

• Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.

• Share the following idea from the devotion for Day 4 as a part of point 3 in the session: Though sinful man is free to carry out the desires of his heart, these desires still serve the plan of God.

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

• Day 2: “When we sin, we are illogical, turning away from worshiping the God who has saved us and instead turning to idols that we have made.”

• Day 5: “Halfhearted worship is no worship at all. True Christians run to God not merely to avoid hell but because He alone is worthy of all worship.”

Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member’s DDG (p. 74) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using The Gospel Project in their groups.

• Encourage group members to consider how God’s discipline in their lives is evidence of His steadfast love for them.

• See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

Point 1: Idolatry results when people fail to see God’s goodness (2 Kings 17:6-12).

“The Assyrians deported the Hebrews to several different areas. Halah was in the general area of Gozan. Some were settled along the Habor River, a tributary of the Euphrates that flowed south from the region of Haran and Gozan to the Euphrates. This region was only about four hundred miles northeast of Israel. However, other Israelites were settled in the territory of the Medes in mountain country east and northeast of the plains of Babylon and Assyria. These exiles were almost a thousand miles from home … These verses [17:7-20] contain one of the great theological statements of the OT—God’s accusation against the Israelites for their covenant faithlessness and that of their kings. It also expresses the climactic moral statement of the Deuteronomic History. This condemnation covered both Judah and Israel, although Judah’s doom was still about 130 years in the future. The author gave a grief-filled statement of why this tragedy happened.”  

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“The deportation was due to Israel’s having worshiped gods other than Yahweh and following the abhorrent practices that their kings had introduced. They had established sacred stones, set up Asherah poles, worshiped other gods at high places and generally provoked the Lord to anger. Time and time again they were warned not to follow these evil ways, but they would not listen. They rejected God, his commandments and the covenant he had made with them. Even after the fall of Israel, the kings of Judah generally persisted in their evil practices. Possession of Israel was given to peoples from other parts of the Assyrian Empire who were resettled in Samaria. It was thought that a number of disasters happened because they did not worship the local god. So a priest from Israel was sent back to Samaria to teach the immigrants the ways of Yahweh. They did learn to worship Yahweh, but they also worshiped their native gods, and their descendants were never seen as part of God’s covenant people.”

Point 2: Idolatry prevents people from heeding God’s warnings (2 Kings 17:13-17).

“The writer’s frustration is evident as the summary continues. Israel has imitated the worst tradition of their fathers and ‘rejected his decrees and the covenant’ (v. 15). They practiced worship rites connected with pagan deities. More specifically, they bowed down before Baal and the Canaanite astral gods. Some of them offered human sacrifices. In short, ‘They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless.’ Unwilling to serve Yahweh, the only God, the Lord who gives life substance and meaning, they gave their lives to nonentities unable to ennoble a people. Only Judah remains at this point in the history, and they act little better than their northern brothers and sisters … How long can Judah last?”
“In 17:14-17 the narrator repeats Israel’s transgressions using negative phrases: Israel would not listen, they did not trust in the Lord their God but rather in worthless idols, they rejected … the covenant, they forsook all the commands. In 17:18-20 he lists the reactions of God in equally negative phrases: he removed them from his presence, he afflicted them, he rejected them, he thrust them away. Common to both sections is the key word that describes the cause and effect: They rejected God and thus, the Lord rejected them. Here we need to make an observation that concerns Judah. The condemnation of high places … sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree (17:9-10) echoes words that previously appeared in 1 Kings 14:23, where they applied to Judah. More recently King Ahaz of Judah participated in pagan worship in these very places (16:4), sacrificed a child (17:17; 16:3), and engaged in divination or ‘seeking guidance’ (17:17; 16:15) … It appears then that this summary of Israel’s sins also refers to Judah’s sins. Thus the statement that God rejected all the people of Israel may well refer to both kingdoms (17:20). Judah is rejected in advance, in the knowledge that she will prove no more repentant than her sister, Israel.”

**Point 3: Idolatry leads people to experience God’s discipline (2 Kings 17:18-20).**

“While God is a God of love (1 John 4:16), he does become angry with those who know his laws but refuse to obey them. No one can stand his fierce anger that burns like fire (Nah. 1:6). No one can stand in God’s day of judgment (Rev. 6:17). So God removed the nation of Israel from his presence, leaving them to the idols that could not save (17:18). Only the tribe of Judah was left. But Judah adopted the same practices as the Israelites, and their fate would be the same as that of their brothers (17:19-20).”

“The good news about Israel’s judgment is that the Lord’s judgment of his covenant people at this time is not the final word. After judgment, God also promised restoration, but restoration by means of a changed heart and, therefore, the gift of faith in order to believe [see Deut. 30:6; Deut. 30:1-10] … Because the Lord is faithful to keep all of his covenant promises, we can look upon the Lord’s judgment of Israel as the beginning of a new work, the Lord’s work to circumcise (i.e., purify) the heart. This work was accomplished by yet another act of judgment, the crucifixion of the Son of God. Thus, by faith, with circumcised hearts, we look upon Christ’s judgment as the source of our own hope. For God’s people, Christ’s judgment on the cross two thousand years ago is our day of judgment—and it is already behind us.”

**References**

The prophetic books of the Old Testament can be confusing, both to the newcomer to the Bible and the longtime reader. Where do these prophets fit in the overall narrative of Israel and Judah? What messages did they communicate? What was God doing in and through their work? The benefit of this volume of The Gospel Project is that it gives you a glimpse of the prophets right at the point their message was going forth to God’s people. We can ask questions of God with Habakkuk, look forward to the coming Suffering Servant with Isaiah, stand amazed at the stunning picture of relentless love in Hosea, and learn something of God’s extravagant love with Jonah.

As you work through the sessions in this volume, keep an eye on all the different ways God reveals Himself and communicates His messages of judgment and grace. Fall to your knees in awe, and then stand up and boldly proclaim the love of this great God, who inspired the prophets to deliver His word.