

The Beginning of the End: The Fall of Israel

The books of First and Second Kings were written to demonstrate the truth of the warnings given to Israel years before in the Law revealed to Moses. You recall in Deuteronomy 28 Moses spoke to Israel prior to their entering the promised land. “If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God. You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. The LORD will establish you as his holy people...if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in obedience to him.

On the other hand Moses warned Israel, “if you do not obey... You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country... cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out... The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young... Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other... you will find

no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart.”

The history of Israel, as told by First and Second Kings, pretty much follows this script. Under the leadership of David and the early years of Solomon, Israel is blessed beyond imagination and all the nations of the world look up to her and fear her. But beginning with Solomon’s own corruption and the disastrous leadership of his son Rehoboam, Israel begins a long and devastating fall beginning with a civil war that divides the nations into the northern kingdom, called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. Ultimately both kingdoms will be defeated and captured by foreign nations, just as Moses had warned. Because a few of the kings in the south were righteous (Josiah and Hezekiah), their demise was delayed. But none of the twenty kings in the north had any respect for God’s law and quickly became aligned with other nations, embracing their idolatry and wickedness. The story of the northern kingdom is summarized in 2 Kings 17: 16-17.

“But they would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their ancestors, who did not trust in the LORD their God. ¹⁵They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their ancestors and the statutes he had warned them to keep. They followed worthless idols and themselves became

worthless. They imitated the nations around them...they forsook all the commands of the LORD their God and made for themselves idols... They bowed down to all the starry hosts, and worshiped Baal. They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire. They practiced divination, sought omens and sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger.”

Israel became idolatrous. What does that really mean? And why is it so bad to worship idols? The obvious answer is that Yahweh alone is worthy of our worship and while the nations may have some excuse, because of their ignorance, but Israel had a long history with Yahweh and should have known better than to worship any god but Yahweh. But there is another reason idolatry is a terrible thing. When we worship an idol we are worshipping an image of a god we have created ourselves, a god we have created in our image. Idolatry is the sin of Eden; it is the sin that cost us paradise; it is the sin of forgetting who is the creator and who is the created.

When you look at the gods of the pagan nations surrounding Israel not surprisingly they look a lot like us or at least they act like us. They are capricious, fickle, unreliable, petty, easily angered, vindictive, vengeful. They have no compassion for humans and the worship they demand of humans is a list of human behavior at its very worst, drunkenness, sexual

immorality and even the murder of children. The pantheons of gods, whether Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Norse or whatever, all of them are simply images of our flawed humanity.

Yahweh is unique among all the gods of the ancient world because he alone is not created in our image, he has instead created us in his image and the importance of that difference cannot be emphasized too much. Israel worshipped a God who could not be brought down to the flawed standards of humanity. Rather, they worshipped a God who continually called humanity to live up the divine standards of holiness. Pagan gods could care less how humans behaved; they hardly cared about humans at all. But Yahweh cares about his people. This is why Israel was in constant rebellion, constant tension with their God. Other nations didn't rebel against their gods; they didn't struggle to live up to the high standards of their gods nations. They might choose to worship a different god because they think he is more powerful; they might become angry because their gods are being unfair to them. But no where in the religious literature of any other nation is there anything like what we read in the prophets and 1 & 2 Kings, which tells of the repeated cycle of obedience and rebellion, blessing and curse between the God who is forever faithful and a people who are hardly ever faithful.

This by the way is one reason why the scripture's account of Israel's story has credibility. The faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses, Joshua and Samuel, David and the prophets is not a faith in a god created by man who acts just like we do, gods we can manipulate and appease with our sacrifices and worship. The God of the scriptures calls us to a far higher standard than any we would ever demand of ourselves. Yahweh calls people to be like him, godly, to reflect his character, to be his image in the world. And Yahweh is not satisfied with changing us individually; he also wants through us to change communities and societies, to create a world that reflects the character of God's mercy and justice.

That is why the prophets not only rebuke the personal immorality of the people but just as much if not more of they condemn Israel for her lack of compassion and justice in society. Listen to Amos' harsh word to Israel. "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken with fines. There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground...

There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain... There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me, Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land.” Yahweh is unimpressed with Israel’s external worship because her behavior makes it clear who she really worships.

Idolatry is the worship of self. It is self-indulgence gone amok. People who worship themselves, who are preoccupied with pleasure, who are unconcerned for others, unwilling to make sacrifices for others are, in a word, selfish. This kind of people inevitably create communities and nations that are unjust, uncaring and proud, just the opposite of the prophet Micah’s admonition. “Hear O man what the Lord requires of thee, to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God.” Israel was called to be a light unto the Gentiles, an example of a godly society that is just not unfair,

merciful not vengeful, generous not greedy, patient not easily angered, peace loving not belligerent, respectful not insulting, repentant not defiant, joyful not depressed, self controlled not out of control. In other words, just the opposite of what idolatry creates, a society that does not conform to human ideas of humanity but a society that is transformed into the image of the divine nature.

People who worship Yahweh and not themselves are consumed with the concerns of the most vulnerable, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the sick, the friendless, the rejected, the lost. In her best moments Israel approached being just such a society and she enjoyed the admiration of the world for no other nation so reflected the nature of God. But Israel struggled to be that kind of country and eventually lost her struggle and became an idolatrous people of unholy character creating a society that acted unjustly, loved vengeance and walked proudly away from God. So God did what he said he would do. He allowed a great nation to come and defeat the people of God. Assyria takes the northern kingdom captive in 722 B.C. and later Babylon will take captive the southern kingdom in 586 B.C.

It is tempting to apply the example and story of Israel to America, to warn our fellow citizens of God's judgment when people choose the idols of

our world rather than worshipping Yahweh alone. It is true that any nation that becomes wicked and corrupt will incur the judgment of God. The prophets warn the nations as much as they do Israel. But the lessons of Israel are not meant for the nation of America. America is not the Kingdom of God, the Church is. The lessons of Israel are to be applied to us. We, as citizens of the world wide Kingdom of God, as the New Israel, have the same calling as Israel of old, to be a light to the Gentiles, the nations around us, an example to those who do not know God, both individually in our personal holiness and as congregations of God's people in every community, every country, every continent, to be colonies of God's Kingdom of grace and justice. The world in which we live is supposed to see in us what people are supposed to be like and in our relationship with each other, in the society of the Church, what communities are supposed to be like. We are to be obedient to Jesus' two great commands: to Love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as much as we love our self. But, like God's people of old, we too are surrounded by many idols that we are constantly tempted to worship, idols that appeal to the worst parts of our human nature. Whether its our entertainment, our politics, our business, our journalism, our education we see constant pressure for us to worship our lust, bow down to our anger, tremble before our fears, make

sacrifices to our own pleasures, to devote ourselves to ourselves. God calls his people to a higher calling. As the song we sometimes sing says,

We are called to be God's people showing by our lives His grace.

One in heart and one in spirit, sign of hope for all the race.

Let us show how he has changed us, and remade us as his own.

Let us share our life together as we shall around His throne.

We are called to be God's prophets spokesman for the truth and right

Standing firm for godly justice, bringing evil into light.

Let us seek the courage needed our high calling to fulfill.

That mankind may know the blessing of the doing of God's will.

We have the same choice as Israel. We can choose to worship God or we can worship ourselves, live for ourselves and ignore God's call for us to be a holy people and a community of people who love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves; concerned that our neighbors are fed and housed and clothed and befriended and cared for with the same concern we have for our own families. But if we reject God's higher calling for us, why should not the same thing happen to us as happened to Israel, why should not we be taken captive by the world around us, our community lost and we simply

scattered among the nations, in which we find no repose, no resting place but only an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart.

We are called to be better than that. We are to be the New Israel in this land of ours, a light to our neighbors. As Peter said, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. In many ways we will be aliens and strangers in our own communities as we earnestly strive to abstain from the sinful activities that many of our neighbors feel free to indulge in. But we have been called to a something far greater than the sinful pleasures of this world; we have been invited by Yahweh to become people who reflect His character and nature to live lives that reflect that character so that others will glorify and serve our God as well. May I close with the words of another great hymn. Jesus calls us from the worship of this vain world's golden store, from each idol that would keep us saying, "Christian, love me more."