

Obituary of a Nation

II Kings 17

Introduction

I have just returned from Lynchburg, Virginia, where I spoke to the student body of Liberty College. While there, my family and I decided to travel a little further north and visit the home of Thomas Jefferson. His plantation is called Monticello, which is Italian for “Little Mountain”. It was beautiful.

Now, if you have traveled to Williamsburg, Virginia, there is the frustration of knowing that ninety-five percent of the items on display are imitation replicas. However, at Monticello, ninety-five percent of the items on the tour are the originals. You truly see Jefferson’s furniture, clocks, some of his books, and even the antlers and maps that were on the wall of his foyer. The doors that lead into his parlor are the originals and the glass panes in the door are the same ones that he looked through as his guests arrived. You feel as if you have stepped back in time.

Of the many quotes I read, from this man who authored our Declaration of Independence, one that struck me was, “Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that His justice cannot sleep forever.”

If Jefferson were trembling in his day, then he would be shaking uncontrollably today. And, how prophetic were his fears, when you observe how far America has fallen. Whether we want to admit it or not; whether we are conscious of it or not, the slumbering justice of God is awakening. We are beginning to discover the truth that America is not big enough to shake her fist in the face of a holy God and get away with it.

Israel was not big enough either. Today, we will observe the nation Israel disband and suffer captivity. The ten tribes of the northern kingdom will disappear. They are still essentially lost to this day, although God knows where they are. There are no genealogical records that would indicate to any Jew today, what tribe he came from.

We will study today, the point at which the nation finally fell; the point at which the judgment of God came; the point at which His sleeping justice that had appeared to wink at their rebellion for centuries, finally awakened and acted. Today, those ten tribes, as well as the other two, are on hold and there is a parenthesis around the nation Israel, as God is, according to the New Testament, creating a new nation called, the church. I want to observe with you, the last king of the nation Israel and the last acts before Israel disappears into bondage.

The Final King of a Fallen Nation

Let us begin in the book of II Kings, chapter 17. Look at verses 1 and 2.

In the twelfth year of Ahaz king of Judah, Hoshea the son of Elah became king over Israel in Samaria, and reigned nine years. He did evil in the sight of the Lord, only not as the kings of Israel who were before him.

We are introduced to a king who is at best, lukewarm. He was not such a bad king. The trouble was, he was not such a good king either. He is actually a perfect leader for a country that is about to go under. He refuses to stand for anything controversial. He is not ungodly, but he is not quite godly.

Skip to verses 5 and 6.

Then the king of Assyria invaded the whole land and went up to Samaria and besieged it three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and carried Israel away into exile to Assyria, and settled them in Halah and Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

Now, we just read a verse that very quickly told us something that we have been studying for more than a year was going to happen. It has finally happened. And, Jeremiah, the author who wrote this account under inspiration, does not want anyone to be mistaken as to why the nation fell; why God judged. He does not want anyone sitting on their porch one day, or working in their back yard saying, “Yea, Israel fell, but it was because they had that wicked King Hoshea.” Or, “Israel fell because they lost their financial edge in the market place.” Or, “Israel fell because they just couldn’t keep up with the surrounding nations.”

No! There is a verse that we will call the hinge verse. It is verse 7. You should underline it in your text. It is the clearest possible statement as to why Israel fell. It gives us the cause and effect. Look at verse 7a.

Now this came about because the sons of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God

...

That is as clear as he can make it.

The Final Acts of a Fallen Nation

Now, what are the final acts of this nation as it falls into oblivion? Let me give you seven steps. And, I would agree with many commentators who see this as a step process, although at some point they are probably doing all of them. Here is the digression downward:

They acknowledged the existence of other gods

1. The first step is that they acknowledged the existence of other gods.

Now look at verse 7 again.

Now this came about because the sons of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them up from the land of Egypt from under the hand of

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and they had feared other gods

The Hebrew word “feared” means, “to respect or to revere”. It is the same word that occurs in Solomon’s writings when he said, in Proverbs, chapter 1, verse 7a,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge . . .

They acclimated to the lifestyle of unbelievers around them

2. The second step is that they acclimated to the lifestyle of unbelievers around them.

Look at verse 8.

and walked in the customs of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before the sons of Israel, and in the customs of the kings of Israel which they had introduced.

They attempted to keep their sins a secret

3. The third step is that they attempted to keep their sins a secret.

Look at the first part of verse 9.

The sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the Lord their God. . .

.

They adopted the idolatrous practices of unbelievers

4. The fourth step is that they adopted the idolatrous practices of unbelievers.

You can see the progression in these steps. First, they acknowledge that other gods exist. Then, they are curious about and for years, follow after the customs of the people and acclimate to that lifestyle. Next, they keep their sins a secret; that is, they no longer ask God to forgive them; they no longer sacrifice for their sins. And then, finally, they are headlong into the idolatrous practices of the people around them.

Look at the last part of verse 9.

. . . Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city.

That is an idiomatic way of simply saying, “They did it everywhere.”

Continue to verses 10 through 12.

They set for themselves sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did which the Lord had carried away to exile before them; and they did evil things provoking the Lord. They served idols, concerning which the Lord had said to them, “You shall not do this thing.”

Skip to verse 16.

They forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah . . .

(You may remember that an Asherah is a wooden deity and is one of the mistresses of Baal. The name Asherah means “mother earth”. They worshiped the earth.),

. . . and worshiped all the host of heaven . . .

(The host of heaven means that they worshiped the Zodiac, which pre-dates this time. They worshiped the stars and the signs and looked to the stars for their future.),

. . . and served Baal.

Continue to verse 17.

Then they made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire, . . .

(that is, they practiced child sacrifice),

. . . and practiced divination and enchantments, . . .

(They were involved in magic and read tea leaves, palms, entrails of deceased animals, and other things.),

. . . and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him.

The truth, from that verse, is that you have a master – Satan, from the underworld, or the Lord. The question is, “Who have you sold yourself to?”

Skip to verse 30.

The men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth . . .

(According to the *Talmud*, this god was shaped like a hen with her chicks.),

. . . the men of Cuth made Nergal, . . .

(This Babylonian deity from the underworld was shaped like a lion.),

. . . the men of Hamath made Ashima

(This is a goat god, or a god with a symbol of a goat – a shaven goat.)

Continue to verse 31.

and the Avvites made Nibhaz . . .

(That is a deity shaped like a dog.),

. . . and Tartak; . . .

(That is a donkey-shaped god.),

. . . and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anamelech the gods of Sepharvaim.

(These gods were shaped like a mule and a horse.)

Now, you might look at these verses and think, “How ridiculous to worship gods in the shape of hens, dogs, goats, mules, and horses.”

However, it fulfills the word of God, in Romans, chapter 1, that tells us that when you deny the Creator, you end up worshiping the creature; the creation.

We joke in our town about “tree huggers,” but I have seen with my own eyes in a park in Toulon, France, people gathered around an old tree embracing it. They were trying to gather from it, what they believed to be, its energy and wisdom.

Perhaps you read the article in the local newspaper recently, telling of a mountain area in our state that has become the “Mecca” of the New Age movement. They are leaving another state and coming here. Why? Because they believe that the mountains have created a special vortex of energy that heals physical and spiritual infirmities. Ladies and gentlemen, it is not just happening in Toulon, France, it is happening here.

They abandoned the prophets and the writings of scripture

5. The fifth step is that they abandoned the prophets and the writings of scripture.

Go back to verses 13 through 15a.

Yet, the Lord warned Israel and Judah . . .

(judgment, by the way, never comes without warning – to an individual or to a nation),

. . . through all His prophets and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets." However, they did not listen, but stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. . . .

God sent the prophets to them. You may remember the names of the prophets who came to the northern kingdom – Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Hosea, and Amos. But, they would not listen.

Today, our country is setting aside the writings of the prophets, rapidly. It is amazing how quickly this nation is putting away these venerated words that are divinely inspired by God.

Our own Supreme court has struck down a Kentucky law that required the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. The Court said that the Ten Commandments were, "Plainly religious, and may induce children to read, meditate upon, perhaps to venerate and to obey the commandments."

Ironically, behind the chief justice of the Supreme Court hangs a copy of the Ten Commandments.

Listen to some of the engravings that adorn the buildings of our nation's capital:

- Engraved on the metal cap on the top of the Washington Monument are the words, "Praise be to God."
- Lining the walls of the stairwell are such biblical phrases as, "Search the Scriptures."
- The words "In God we trust" are inscribed in the marble behind the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

The founding fathers of our nation created institutions of higher learning so that they would not, "leave an illiterate ministry to the churches". In other words, they established them so there would be people who would preach the Word and people could always hear what the scriptures say.

Listen to three of the "rules and precepts" for the student body of Harvard University from the year 1646.

- Every one shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life [that is, you must be saved].
- Seeing the Lord giveth wisdom, every one shall seriously be in secret prayer, seeking wisdom of Him [that is, you need to have devotions].
- Every one shall so exercise himself in reading the scriptures twice a day that they be ready to give an account, among other things, to its practical and spiritual truths.

Imagine that the University of Pennsylvania got its first building when Benjamin Franklin decided to erect a building to accommodate the great crowds that wanted to hear George Whitefield preach. That building became the first building on the university's campus, and to this day, a statute of George Whitefield, the fiery preacher, is prominently displayed on the campus.

Our nation once venerated the writings of scripture and the preaching of its prophets. Today, the nation as a whole, has set both aside!

So, what will happen? Well, I have in my library the works of Charles Spurgeon and Alexander McLaren. Spurgeon and McLaren pastored in London, England, at the same time. Their churches impacted nearly twenty thousand people each week. I pulled their books off my shelf and read their sermons on II Kings, chapter 17. They preached with passion and made direct applications to their own culture; to England and its fall. Today, London echoes with the emptiness of ritual and liturgy and vain religion.

Have you ever marveled how few churches in this county are known for clearly preaching and teaching the word of God?! When you moved here, did you struggle to find a church that seemed alive; that honored the Bible? Instead of a hundred choices, you had a handful. The same thing that is happening in London is happening here too.

And our city is not unique. In America, in 1900, there was one church for every 12,000 people. In 1990, there was one church for every 27,000 people. If you project that to the next generation, there would be one church for every 50,000 or 60,000 people. That means the population of our city might only have one church that holds the Bible and its Author high.

They achieved the end result of their rebellion

6. The sixth step, as this nation continued to fall, is that they achieved the end result of their rebellion.

Look at the middle part of verse 15.

. . . And they followed vanity and became vain, . . .

That is an interesting statement, by the way. You should underline that. They followed vanity – and they became vain. That is another way of saying, “You become what you worship.”

If you worship things, you become materialistic. If you worship wickedness, you become wicked. If you pursue empty things, your life becomes empty. You become what you have worshiped all along.

Israel followed vanity, which is another word for “emptiness”. The Hebrew word could literally be rendered “air”. They followed “air” and they became “air”.

Skip to verse 18.

So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah.

So, what does Israel do? What would you recommend that they do, at this point in time? We would probably all unanimously say, “Repent! Pursue God!”

Yet, their final act will plunge Samaria into darkness that will last through the time of Christ. Do you remember when Jesus Christ came to Samaria and witnessed to the woman at the well? She had no clue as to what true worship was. Their final act will plunge them into that darkness.

They attempted a pluralistic solution to appease God

7. The seventh step is that they attempted a pluralistic solution to appease God.

In other words, “Let’s add God to our growing list of gods. We worship these things; let’s worship the true God too.”

Now, according to verse 25,

. . . they did not fear the Lord; therefore the Lord sent lions among them which killed some of them.

So, in verse 26, they said,

. . . [they] do not know the custom of the god of the land; so he has sent lions among them, and behold, they kill them because they do not know the custom of the god of the land.

In other words, they had trouble with lions coming into town. So, the people said, “The god of this land must be upset – he’s sending lions. We’ve forgotten what this god requires. Let’s get a priest to come and teach us the rituals and help us go through the motions of Judaism.”

So, they brought in a priest from Bethel. Bethel was the capital of calf worship. Calf worship was one of the Israelites’ grave sins that had continued for years. They made golden calves and worshiped them, while saying, out of the other side of their mouths, that they were worshiping the God whom these calves represented.

So, they bring in a priest who knows how to worship a golden calf. He does not help them at all. He teaches them a religion of profession, “Here is how you say, ‘Elohim’; here is how you say, ‘God’; and here are some things that He likes – go to church on Sunday morning, try to do certain things, like pray to Him; add Him to your list, but then on Monday through Saturday, serve your other gods.”

The priest taught them how to do something with their lips that they did not do in their lives. So, they began to live a lie. It was lip service from a nation who was trusting in everything else but God. The echo of empty religion is becoming more apparent all the time.

I read an article from the Associated Press news recently, about a rather startling discovery related to Richard Byrd. Richard Byrd was hailed as a national hero for having been the first person to fly to the North Pole. However, among other papers discovered at Ohio State University’s Byrd Polar Research Center, which was built and named in his honor, part of his flight diary was discovered. Byrd had written that he and his pilot-mechanic were concerned about a leak in the engine. As a result, they came within one hundred fifty miles of the North Pole and then, knowingly, turned around, came back . . . and lied.

Can you imagine being honored and acclaimed and being held up as a hero and having buildings built and named for you, while all along you knew your claim was a lie? We can do that too. We can say

with our lips, “We know God,” and yet, with our lives, bespeak a lie.

Let me ask you, is your claim to know God a lie? Do you go to church to maintain a sham? I tremble for you, because God is just and His justice will not sleep forever. As with this nation Israel, His justice awakes with great fury.

Application – Lessons From the Fall of Israel

What can we learn from the fall of Israel? We have been studying their digression for weeks. It has been a difficult task to try to put into words some final thoughts as we say, “Goodbye,” to Israel and turn our attention to Judah, who will fall a hundred or so years later. Let me give a couple of encouraging thoughts, while I make analogies to the fall of that nation and the fall of this nation.

While the success of a nation depends upon its adherence to scripture, the success of a church does not depend upon its nation

1. First, while the success of a nation depends upon its adherence to scripture, the success of a church does not depend upon its nation.

Do not attach the future of the church to the future of any nation. If you listen to some preachers, you get the idea that at the collapse of America, the rapture will occur. It is as if God has tied His plans to this country and if America collapses, what else can God do? Now, if I am sounding unpatriotic, I do not mean to. I love America. But, I do not believe the hope of the church rests on the honor of America.

This may shock some of you, but God’s plans for the church today are not riding on the upcoming elections. Believe it or not, the success of God’s church is not even handicapped by the decisions of our supreme court. When prayer was ushered out of the public schools of America, it did reveal the character of our nation and it did put another nail in the coffin of our country, but it did not send the Trinity into “panic mode”. If that bothers you, you are welcome to write a letter to me – and address it to one of the other pastors!

Christ Himself said, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 18b,

. . . I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

We have “Americanized” God’s plan. We have put ourselves in the center of what we think He is doing worldwide. We are too puny to come to that conclusion. We take this Bible and we twist it.

The truth is, according to I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9, God has created a new nation, a new race of believers who comprise the church, so that we should show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. And, He has placed us inside the borders of this nation – to pray for it, to shine in it, to preserve it as salt preserves from decay and destruction.

The mission of the church remains the same whether its nation is godly or ungodly

2. A second thought is that the mission of the church remains the same whether its nation is godly or ungodly.

Jesus Christ challenged His disciples, and us, with, what we call, the Great Commission – to go and make disciples of all nations. This is what you are supposed to do – to win and train people one at a time in the gospel of Jesus Christ! It does not matter whether the nation is oppressive, communistic, or a free land, this truth can be preached.

Today, unfortunately, popular authors, pastors, and radio talk show hosts give the incorrect impression that, since America is decidedly post-Christian, our mission is to change. You get this alarming attitude that says, “We’ve got to do something.” The truth is, we do have to do something, but what?

The apostle Paul lived in a day when Rome was decaying. Homosexuality was so rampant in Paul’s day that one Roman writer said that to be considered anything other than bisexual was to be a bore or a prude. Divorce was so rampant that Seneca wrote, “Roman women number the years with the names of their husbands.” That is incredible when you consider the fact that during the first five hundred years of the Roman empire, there was not one recorded case of divorce. Furthermore, by the time of the apostle Paul, a Roman parent had the right to kill their newborn, if they did not like its sex or the child was deformed.

Let me read, from *Christian History*, a letter from this time. It was written by a Greek man named Hilarion, to his wife Alis.

Very many greetings. Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not be anxious; if they

really go home, I will remain in Alexandria. I beg and entreat you, take care of the little one, and as soon as we receive our pay, I will sent it up to you. If by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it live, if it is a girl, cast it out.

What were the Roman Christians, and any Christian in times like these, told to do? Well, for one thing, consider what they were not told to do. If you read the book of Romans, God's epistle to the Christians living in Rome, you will discover that the apostle Paul never challenged the Christians to reform Rome. He never warned the early church, "If Rome collapses, the church is finished."

God simply said, through his servant Paul in the book of Romans, ungodliness will not go without judgment. An individual or a nation who takes such ungodly steps as the ones listed in Romans, chapter 1, will find out that God's justice does not sleep forever. They will eventually experience the wrath of God. Then He tells the Roman Christians, which was probably a shock to their ears, to pray for their leaders and their country. And, they were to penetrate and permeate, not panic, with the light of the gospel.

Let me read the words of a man who spoke some time ago to our nation.

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then to humble ourselves, to confess our national sins, and to pray for forgiveness.

These words were spoken on April 30, 1863, by Abraham Lincoln.

A nation cannot rise from ungodly character unless there is revival in the church's character and purpose

3. Another thought is that a nation cannot rise from ungodly character unless there is revival in the church's character and purpose.

While the church does not depend upon its nation for survival, the nation depends upon the church for survival. Without the light of the gospel, no nation or culture can do anything but progress in its unbelief and superstition.

America is progressing in that direction today. What is God's plan for America? What is God's solution? Has it ever occurred to you that *YOU* are His plan in this nation; that *YOU* are His solution?

Stop pining for the "good old days". According to the history that I have read, they were not all that good. We do not need a return, we need a revival. And I am using that word in its correct sense. A revival has nothing to do with an unbeliever. According to Ephesians, chapter 2, an unbeliever is spiritually dead. You cannot revive a corpse; you can revive someone who is already alive, but is asleep, inactive, lethargic.

My concern this morning, that comes from this chapter in Israel's history, is not with the unbelieving world. Assyrians do what Assyrians do; Romans do what Romans do. And Paul, writing to his son in the faith, in II Timothy, chapter 3, verse 13, says,

But evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse . . .

In other words, men will grow worse and worse, so expect it; count on it. My concern is with the sleeping church. It seems so calm as it reads the obituary of its own nation.

We have read the obituary of a nation today – the fall of Israel. It is my estimation and belief, that the obituary of our nation has already gone to press. The next generation will feel the full impact of a spiritual famine.

Look at what Jeremiah writes in verse 41 of II Kings, chapter 17. If this does not sound like our nation, I do not know what does.

So while these nations feared the Lord, . . .

(that is, they gave "lip service"),

. . . they also served their idols; their children likewise and their grandchildren, as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

They gave their children the heritage of idolatry.

Two reminders

You are probably wondering, what good can I, one person, do to rescue this decaying, spiritually famine stricken nation? What can we, one church, do to change our world? Let me give two reminders.

God has not commanded you to reform your culture

1. Remember, God has not commanded you to reform your culture.

God taught us to expect the worst from our culture, as Paul wrote to Timothy. Let me put it another way. A lighthouse never once got rid of a storm. In fact, the reason it was built was because of the darkness; its very existence presupposed the presence of storms. *YOU* are the light of the world! What does that mean? It means that your world will be incredibly dark. I fear we often pray for our country so that things will just settle down for us. But, we are to expect evil and to shine in it. The gospel that we share, as we are commanded to do, will reform our culture. It is the power of God unto salvation.

God has commanded you to reach one person at a time

2. Secondly, remember that God has commanded you to reach one person at a time.

There are times that I think, “Lord, how are we going to reach this city? How are we going to reach this area?”

I have to go back to this reminder – one person at a time.

This past week, I heard about one of our church members who worked next to an unbeliever in the office. Over a process of time, this unbeliever finally came to her and asked what it was about her that made such a difference in her life. After an hour of sharing the gospel, the co-worker accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Savior.

That is how you, God’s solution, can make a difference.

You have probably heard the story of the young man who was walking along the beach at dawn. He noticed an old man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them back into the ocean. Catching up with the man, the young man asked what he was doing. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left under the morning sun. “But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish . . . how can you make any difference?”

The old man looked at the starfish in his hand and quietly said, “I make a difference to this one,” and he threw it to the safety of the ocean waves.

My friend, what difference are you making?

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/12/1996 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1996 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.