

A Nation's Post Mortem

By Brad Allison on 5/14/2006

Scripture Reference *2 Kings 17*

Our chapter describes the exile of the northern kingdom, Israel, to Assyria in the year 722 B.C. The word “exile” cannot begin to capture the traumatic nature of this experience. The exile was preceded by a three-year siege on Israel’s capital city, Samaria. It was a well-fortified city, and the Assyrian army would have suffered numerous casualties in the attempt to take the city by force. So they opted for the alternative of a siege, choking off all support for the city. It’s amazing that a city could last three-years under those circumstances, and undoubtedly such a long siege was accompanied by much starvation and suffering. But the suffering didn’t end with the conclusion of the siege. Hosea 13:16 describes in a prophetic way the violence that ensued following the siege. “Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword; their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open.” Many who were left alive following this violence were led back to Assyria as captives in a way designed to bring shame upon them. Isaiah was once told by God to walk around Israel naked and barefoot for three years. God told him to do so in order to illustrate how the Assyrians led people into exile. “As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt (20:3-4). The same tactics would have been employed against Israel.

The two books of Kings were written following the exile of the southern kingdom, Judah, to Babylon in 586 B.C. and before the return from exile 70 years after that. The Israelites were troubled by the question of how such a thing could happen. Hadn’t God promised to Abraham that he would become a nation that would last forever and become a blessing to the whole world? Hadn’t he told David that he would always have a king to sit on the throne? Yet by the end of the book, David’s descendent, Jehoiachin, the last king of the southern kingdom, is taken to Babylon where he is imprisoned. What had happened to God’s promises? The exile provoked a crisis of faith for the remaining Jews following the exile of both the northern and southern kingdoms. This passage explains how the exile happened in the case of the northern kingdom, Israel.

One of the reasons our author gives for the exile is a bad political decision made by Hoshea, king of Israel. He had been paying tribute to Assyria, but decided one day to stop doing so. Assyria was the superpower of this day, having surpassed a weakened Egypt to take that position. The failure to pay tribute was seen as a treasonous act, leading Assyria to attack. Egypt then failed to come through with the promised protection, leaving little Israel to fend for itself against this mighty superpower. But I notice that only three verses are devoted to this explanation. The real reason for Israel’s captivity by Assyria is a spiritual reason, which our author explains at length beginning in verse 7 and running all the way through to verse 23. In short, Israel’s exile was brought about because of their sin, not because of a bad political decision. As a matter of fact, the very next chapter records that Judah’s king, Hezekiah, made the same bad decision and also stopped paying tribute to Assyria. The Assyrian army responded similarly by laying siege to Jerusalem. But this time the outcome was different, with God himself coming to the aid of Judah and defeating the Assyrian army, because Hezekiah trusted in the Lord and obeyed him. But that wasn’t the case with Israel. Of all their kings throughout their 200-year history following the division of the kingdom after Solomon, not one of them acted righteously. So let’s look at the specific spiritual failures of this nation. It is important that we do so, because people fail for the same reasons that nations fail. The Assyria’s of our lives can’t do us any real damage, but sin can. As we’re going to see shortly, Israel’s big sin was that of regarding their God as a small God. Their failure is expressed well in

a title of a book written by Ed Welch called *When People Are Big and God Is Small*. Notice, then, the failures of a “Small-God” people and the hope for a “Big God” people.

I. The Failures of a “Small-God” People

There are several sins named in this indictment of Israel, but they can be summarized in two sins: idolatry and not listening to God. Let’s talk first about idolatry. Israel “feared other gods” (v. 7). “They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree” (v. 10). Verse 12 is very explicit: “They served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, ‘You shall not do this.’” Finally, notice verse 15: “They went after false idols and became false.” Idolatry is a central category of sin throughout the Bible. John Calvin understood this and called the human heart an idol factory. One of the difficulties in applying the biblical teaching about idols to ourselves is that we have a shallow view of idolatry. We think that idolatry would be for us to deny Jesus and start worshiping Buddha. But notice even in this passage that idolatry is far more subtle than that. For example, note that Israel’s idolatry is described as being done “secretly.” “And the people of Israel did *secretly* against the Lord their God things that were not right” (v. 9). What that means is that they did not abandon their worship of Jehovah. They simply added to him the worship of these other gods. In the same way, idolatry can fill the hearts of God’s people who gather for worship in church each week.

What is an idol and how can we recognize them in our lives? Here’s my definition: an idol is anything we look to apart from trusting in the true God in order to help us deal with the brokenness of life. For example, think with me about that well-known case of idolatry when Aaron made the two golden calves while Moses was on the mountain with God. Israel had just come out of Egypt and were in a desert. Their leader, Moses, had been on the mountain for a long time, and they thought he had probably died there. So they were feeling a great deal of uncertainty and fear, and these idols were their attempt to deal with that. The attraction of an idol is that it is under our control, and it makes us feel good to be in control.

So what are some of the common idols we struggle with? Let me mention two. First and quite common today is the approval of others. When life is feeling frightening and out of control, we will often take refuge not in the promises of the true God, but in the approval of others. We will say, “At least I’m a success at work and people approve of me because of that success.” Did you know that many successful people have a great fear of being exposed as an imposter? That is an expression of this idol of approval. People fear such exposure because they value the opinions of others too highly.

Illustration: Let me give you an example from my own life. One of the fears and uncertainties confronting me in the past couple of months has related to our building program. If you’re visiting with us and haven’t heard about this, our bids on this project came in at almost \$1 million over the amount our cost estimator had given us at the beginning of the project. We all knew it would be a little over, because we had added some things that we felt were needed. But no one was prepared for that size of a shortfall. As I was thinking and praying about this one day, it occurred to me that one possibility we had regarding this project was simply to wait until we had enough money in the bank to build it. I was surprised by how strongly that option gripped my heart, in spite of some very obvious problems with it. Upon further reflection, I realized that my attraction to this option was due more to my fear of failure than to any spiritual wisdom. I’m not saying that it is a bad decision to avoid borrowing in order to pay cash for things, but only that in my case I was drawn to that option because of an idol in my life. I didn’t want to be seen as a failure as a pastor because of future budget crunches due to having to pay back this loan. I wanted the approval of people. My response to the fear and insecurity of a financial shortfall was

not to trust a big God, but to flee to an idol of controlling things myself and making sure that I didn't fail.

A second example of common idols in our day is to create a fantasy world into which we can enter and have everything exactly as we want it. Such a world can easily become idolatrous. A woman in a difficult marriage begins to fantasize about what it would be like to be married to that nice man she knows in church. She even imagines both of their spouses dying so she can get married to him in a way that won't have to include the messiness of divorce. Or take another example of a fantasy world. You hear a very good musician performing, and begin to fantasize about yourself in that position, receiving the approval of the audience for yet another brilliant performance. Do you see why these are idols? They are attempts to deal with the brokenness of life in a sinful world by our own devices instead of by trusting in the true God. We don't like the reality of the world given to us by the true God, so we make up our own. As verse 15 points out, when we worship false idols, we ourselves become false. Listen to the way Soren Kierkegaard speaks of this:

Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when everyone has thrown off his mask? Do you believe that life will always let itself be mocked? Do you think you can slip away a little before midnight to avoid this? Or are you not terrified by it? I have seen men in real life who so long deceived others that at last their true nature could not reveal itself; I have seen men who played hide and seek so long that at last in madness they disgustingly obtruded upon others their secret thoughts which hitherto they had proudly concealed.

Our idols change us and enslave us. They promise freedom and give bondage. Ed Welch tells of a young woman named Sarah who was a three-sport star at a top college. Amazingly, though she was only a sophomore, she had been elected captain of all three teams. You might think that someone like that would be feeling very good about life. But the truth was that Sarah was apparently far more desperate than anyone knew. She desperately wanted to please people, and felt that the way to do so was to be the best girlfriend, the best athlete and the best student. She couldn't keep up, though, and wanted to quit one of the teams. But because of the idol of pleasing others, she simply couldn't bear the thought of disappointing her teammates. So she took the only way out she knew. Sarah took a .22 caliber rifle and shot herself in the chest. Our idols will destroy us, just as they did Israel.

The second sin which is highlighted in this passage is Israel's sin of not listening to God. Verses 13-14 constitute an important hinge in the text. They report how God sent warnings to the people through the ministry of the prophets. But the indictment is that "they would not listen" (v. 14). The result was an even greater increase in sin, leading to such abominable practices as child sacrifice. So the pattern of their sin is this: they fell into idolatry, God sent his prophets to warn them to repent of that idolatry, they did not listen, and finally they fell into even deeper sin. Their big sin was in not listening to God through his prophets. The Bible teaches that God's word will not return to him empty (Is. 55:11). It will have an effect. But it is important to point out that its effect is not always a positive one. Did you know that being here this morning and hearing God's word is a very dangerous thing. You cannot leave here unchanged. God's word never leaves a person as it finds him. If you do not listen, believe and obey God's word, you will be hardened by it. It will either soften or harden.

So we need to listen to God's word. Let me point out two ways God convicted me this week of not listening. Even as I was studying this passage, I found myself thinking, "How could these Israelites be so stupid as to worship all these idols? Don't they see that it is destroying them?" Of course, my assumption is that I would never do such a thing. The effect of that is that I am not listening to God because I am too busy condemning others. We don't listen to God when we see sin in others but are blind to it in our own lives.

Another sin of not listening that I saw in my life this week is to think that when I've understood and agreed with something, it's as good as doing it. For example, I have concluded lately that I need to do more than I've been doing in the area of outreach, of spending time with people who don't yet follow Jesus. But it's one thing to come to that conclusion and another to do something about it. The danger is that I would think that since I've come to the conclusion, that's as good as doing something about it. Imagine a mother who tells her six-year old son that he needs to begin cleaning his room every day. He listens politely and agrees to do it. He even comes in to her later and says, "Mom, thanks for telling me to clean up my room. I can see that doing so will make me much happier and will be a proper expression of love for you." The mother is thrilled at her six-year old. But then the next day, the room is not cleaned up. Every day, the mother talks about the need to clean up the room, and every day her son agrees to do it. But then he never does. He has not listened, has he? I am convicted that I do the same.

II. The Hope for a "Big-God" People

We don't listen to God and begin worshiping idols when God becomes small to us. So our need is to see that our God is not small at all. He's much bigger than we know and fully able to care for us and keep his promises to us. The last half of our chapter demonstrates the faithfulness of God in an unusual way. After Israel went into exile to Assyria, the Assyrians brought in people from other nations to resettle the region. But we read that these people did not know and fear Jehovah, with the result that God sent lions among them. Israel may have been forced off the land because of their sin, but God had not left it.

Consider also this story within the larger context of the Bible. It seems that everything ends tragically in the history of the Old Testament. Men become so evil that God sends a flood in the days of Noah. He redeems his people from Egypt, only to have all those over forty years old die in the wilderness because of their unbelief. The period of the Judges is marked by a spiraling descent into sin and chaos, and now the monarchy ends too because of the sin of man. Something more radical is needed, and the nature of that solution will be revealed 7 centuries later when Jesus comes. Consider this about Jesus. Sin leads to banishment, to exile. It happened in the Garden of Eden, and happens again now with the northern kingdom. But Jesus has come to deliver us from our sin by taking our place. Jesus lived the life of an exile, and there is New Testament language that deliberately makes this point. When he was just a baby, his parents were forced into exile to Egypt because of the murderous threats of King Herod. Jesus had no place to lay his head. And when he died on the cross, he did so outside the gate, as an outsider. He was exiled that we might be brought home to God.

CONCLUSION:

I want to close with two applications. First, listen to God in everything he says. God's word is powerful, and it will change you, making you softer if you listen, and harder if you don't. Second, take your fears and needs to your big God. We become susceptible to idolatry when we respond to fear and uncertainty as if God can't help us. But he can. He is not the small god of the idolater, but the big God of the Bible. Look to him in faith. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has died that we might live, and who has been raised in power that we might live forever. We are going to take an opportunity to come to our big God now as we bring to him our offerings.