

U-TURN HERE – AND NOW!
2 Kings 17:5-9, 13-15,18-20

Have you notice how people seem determined to do the very things that hurt them? You probably know someone with high blood pressure whom physicians have been told to cut down on their salt intake and yet he or she ignores the warning. Excessive use of alcohol can produce liver malfunctions and create an addictive dependence on this dangerous chemical. We read about people who use cocaine or meth with the result that their dreams fall apart as they spend their future on the present's passing pleasure. Jesus warned us that the devil came to steal, kill and destroy. The bent toward self destruction is indicative of a world that has not yet come under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Because the nation of Israel did not submit itself to God and commit to following His ways, then it self-destructed. The nation first split and took on two separate governments. This division made them more vulnerable to outside enemies. Many people today are divided personalities. They are trying to live under two separate value systems. They think that it is possible to be friends with God, and at the same time, be friends with the world. We cannot embrace the world system of doing things and be submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. (We must be careful to not reject an idea or method of operation just because a secular organization is using it. Many successful methodologies are based on sound Biblical principles.)

We tolerate this tendency toward self-destruction in both the physical and spiritual parts of our lives because we do not see an immediate "cause and effect" relationship. It usually takes years for the permanent damage of alcohol abuse to show up. The effects of marijuana usage may not show up fully until the next generation. The ungodly lyrics of rock music may not surface in behavior aberrations until later in life. Entertaining lewd and impure thoughts may take years to surface simply because the opportunity to put such thoughts into practice may not present itself until later. It took more than two hundred years for the Northern Kingdom of Israel to see the full effects of ignoring God's warning against following other gods and adopting the ways of the heathen nations.

Even in the beginning of their nation as a separate state apart from Judah, they started in the wrong direction. To keep the people from returning to Jerusalem to worship God, their first king, Jeroboam, set up two separate places of worship in Israel. What might seem to have been a good thing (making worship more convenient) turned out to be terribly bad. To attract more people and perhaps to encourage those that had strayed into Baal or other pagan worship, he combined elements of the local customs with worship of the Lord God. He made golden calves and had these erected in the temples! We consider this and think "how silly" to believe that people would fall for something like this. Eventually, the seeds we sow will yield a harvest.

Payday Someday – 17:5-9

⁵ Then the king of Assyria invaded the whole land and went up to Samaria and besieged it three years. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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 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. ⁹ The sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the LORD their God. Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. 2 Kings 17:5-9 (NASB95)

God sent His prophets to warn the leaders and the people. The warnings did no good. They, as so many people today, would rather "do it their way" and die rather than surrender to

God and find real life. For Israel, stability deteriorated and toward the end, they had five kings in ten years. The last of the kings was Hoshea.

Records of the Assyrians show that they took about 27,000 people of Israel captive. These were thought to be the leaders of the nation. The poor and ignorant were left in the land and the Assyrians brought in foreigners to live in the area. These intermarried with the Hebrew people and their descendants were known as Samaritans. The Jews (the people of Judah) despised the Samaritans and this hatred was evident some 700 years later during the time of Jesus.

Secular history would say that the nation of Israel fell because the Assyrians were out for conquest of the area and they had superior military might. That is a true statement; however, it ignores the underlying cause which the Bible addresses. "The children of Israel had sinned against God . . . and had feared other gods . . . walked in the statutes of the heathen." They sinned against God in spite of the fact that God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and had established them as a nation in the place of the pagans who had occupied the land of Canaan. They were instructed to remember this act of God's grace and were commanded to carry out annual observances of the Passover so that they would not forget what God had done for them.

The Exodus had happened nearly 700 years before this time. Is it reasonable to expect these people to have remained faithful and keep remembering something that happened 700 before? The short answer to that question is "Yes!" That is almost like asking if the death of Christ on the Cross 2000 years ago is something that we should remember and have influence on the way we live? What are some of the things that we can do to keep this significant event in the forefront of our consciousness? Isn't this why we observe the Lord's Supper and celebrate the Resurrection of Christ? It is more than interesting that those with a godless, secular world view would like to eliminate any such observances from public life in our country. So far, they haven't been successful in doing that; however, the true meaning of the Lord's Supper has been distorted by some to interpret the observance as the way we actually receive more of the presence of Christ in our lives. In the case of the Resurrection celebration, the secular world has blurred the meaning with bunnies, colored eggs and fancy clothes. By the time the King James' translation of the Bible was underway, the Greek word *pascha* (which was normally translated Passover) was translated Easter one out of the 29 times it appeared in the text. The origin of this word was from a Saxon word (Eostre), denoting a goddess of the Saxons, in honor of whom sacrifices were offered about the time of the Passover. Hence the name came to be given to the festival of the Resurrection of Christ, which occurred at the time of the Passover. You can see how easy it is to let the influence of the surrounding culture impact our most solemn religious observances.

In verse nine, we see something interesting in that people of the Northern kingdom carried out these pagan customs in secret. The obvious implication is that they knew it was wrong, but they did it anyway. Why hide the practice unless you think it is wrong? I guess that is worse than conducting a wrong practice out of ignorance. Such practices had thoroughly infiltrated the nation. There were little shrines or monuments or Asherah poles (groves) in every city. These could be found in the watchtowers on the city walls and on every high hill and under large trees out in the countryside. It got started with the two calves that Jeroboam put in the two places of worship he instituted some 250 years prior to this time. We could conclude that God was very patient with them and gave them ample opportunity to repent and turn back to Him. Eventually, there was an accounting time and they reaped the rewards of their actions.

Payday Someday (a sermon title by the late R. G. Lee) is an excellent description of the

fact that God's judgments are sure and we will reap what we sow.

Turn or Burn – 17:13-15

¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah 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." ¹⁴ However, they did not listen, but stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. And they followed vanity and became vain, and *went* after the nations which surrounded them, concerning which the LORD had commanded them not to do like them. 2 Kings 17:13-15 (NASB95)

Apparently, recognizing messages from God is difficult for people. Surely, if we knew that a message was from God, then we would follow the instructions! The truth is, most of us obey God if it is convenient, if it doesn't cost us anything and if it is what we wanted to do anyway. Otherwise, we can get very stubborn or filled with excuses for not doing what God wants us to do. The person who cheats on his or her spouse knows what God wants and yet ignores it. The woman who has an abortion to end an inconvenient pregnancy knows she is taking a human life but does it anyway. We could go on and on with a long list of practices that we know to be wrong but do them anyway – many times these practices are done in secret.

As with the nation of Israel (both Judah and the Northern kingdom), people, even today, reject what the word of God says and pursue things that have no substance. The Bible says they followed vanity. Many of the more contemporary translations interpret this to mean "vain idols" or the vain or empty philosophies pertaining to the religious thought associated with the idol. The problem is that we become like what we pursue. Those who pursue foolishness become foolish, those who pursue righteousness become righteous in their walk (1 John 3:7), and those who pursue vanity become vain. While most people in western cultures would never bow down to a carved or molten image representing a pagan deity, many do engage or even devote themselves to activities that could be characterized as basically empty. We tend to put nice names on these activities such as entertainment or amusement.

It is some ironic that the word "amuse" is from either the Old French *amuser* which meant to 'deceive' and from *muser* which meant to 'stare stupidly' or it can be related to the Greek use of the word "muse" which is associated with "thinking." The insertion of the letter "a" before a word changes its meaning to "not" or "without" whatever the word previously meant. In reality, the entertainment of today would be improved by being a neutral, "non-thinking" diversion as opposed to the manipulation of and molding of our world view into philosophies that are expressly contradictory to the principles of the word of God.

The following is from an essay by Darren Lauzon entitled the *Tyranny of Entertainment*:

Although we agree that the substance of our entertainment is in rapid decline, we seem unaware or unwilling to admit that the sights and sounds of popular culture are damaging - the evidence is overwhelmingly conclusive. In a 1990 analysis by Professor George Comstock and Haejung Paik reviewed almost two hundred methodologically sound studies correlating programming violence and aggressive behavior. They predictably concluded: "Heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels and all levels of intelligence.. It cannot be denied or explained away." - as most ordinary individuals understood to be common sense.

What is even more alarming is that our society has yet to experience the full impact of media violence. "According to all available research on the subject," says Medved (1992) "the most significant aspects of that influence are gradual and cumulative, not immediate, and they occur only after extended exposure." The combinations of "programming" and other societal ills such as drugs, poverty, divorce, and so on have potentially devastating consequences.

The images around us are more than entertainment - they help to create reality itself by defining

"normal." "Ads appeal to feelings," writes Schechter (1997) "bypassing critical thinking. We treat images as reality." Focus On The Family youth culture specialist Bob DeMoss (1992) concurs, "Because we hate commercial messages, it's easy to dismiss them as unworthy of serious study. Furthermore, we may underestimate the impact that ads actually have on us and our children" The thought of the media oligarchy defining what children of America - my children - consider normal is a terrifying one.

The bottom line is that the influence of pagan idol worship was pervasive and gradual and resulted in a moral degradation of the society of the Northern kingdom of Israel and that is exactly what is happening in our society today as a result of "empty" or "vain" pursuits.

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God – 17:18-20

¹⁸ So the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah.

¹⁹ Also Judah did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. ²⁰ The LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel and afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them out of His sight. 2 Kings 17:18-20 (NASB95)

Eventually, God responds to continued rebellion by people. It took more than 400 years before the inhabitants of Canaan were dispossessed of the land in which they lived. It only took about 250 year before the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel lost their land. The Canaanites may have been given more time because of their ignorance and the Israelites had less time because they had the law and the prophets and still continued in their sinful ways. The judgment on them was not some knee-jerk reaction that had finally built up and God in a fit of rage did this to them. This had been told to their fathers before they ever occupied the Promised Land that exile was the outcome for rebellion against God.

After the dispersion of the ten tribes, the only remnant left was the tribe of Judah and part of Benjamin that was incorporated into Judah. Unfortunately, they had been infected by the same idolatrous disease that plagued the ten northern tribes. God continued to send his prophets to them to warn them of what was going to happen, but it did not stop the continued slide toward judgment that came about around 130 years after the fall of Israel when Judah was taken into captivity and deported to Babylon.

God's people are repeatedly warned not to adopt the world's ways. We should have a mindset that we have no alternative except to do things God's way. When we adopt worldly ways in some areas of our lives, then we find we will be in constant debate about the remaining areas whether or not we will go the way of the world or the way of the Cross. Israel started with the two golden calves, moved to astrology (worshiped the hosts of heaven) and then move on to worship Baal. They eventually engaged in human sacrifice and adopted practices of witchcraft. All these are spiritual adultery. All were subjects of warnings from Moses regarding the consequences of such practices. The people must have thought that God would not do what He said He would do. We should pray that we do not make that same mistake, for we can know for sure that if God said it, then it will happen.