

2 Kings 17:7-23 – The Fall of Israel

Introduction

After Solomon, the nation Israel was divided into two kingdoms: The northern kingdom from this point on is called “Israel” and the southern kingdom from this point on is called “Judah”. Each would have its own kings but would develop different spiritual destinies. “Israel” from its very first king to its last would never follow God and instead fall deeper and deeper into the worship of false gods and false religions, completely forsaking the One True God. Sometimes Judah would possess a righteous king that would lead the people back to God but often had leaders that weren’t much different from the northern kingdom’s. Both would eventually suffer God’s judgment for their unfaithfulness, first Israel in being given over to Assyria, and several hundred years later when Judah would be given over to Babylon.

The judgment of Israel was supposed to serve as an example to Judah that they might learn firsthand the consequences of life without God. This passage summarizes the cause and effect of Israel’s actions and God’s responses which resulted in final judgment. The northern kingdom of Israel would never again exist after its Assyrian captivity and destruction.

Although this might be interesting historically, the application we’re seeking here is whether or not there are similar behaviors or choices in our life that are driving us away from God or back to Him.

⁷Now 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 ⁸and 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.

[Read 7-8]

Q: It has obviously been many hundreds of years since Israel was brought out of Egypt by God and the people to which these words are being uttered are obviously many generations removed from that event. Why does the discussion begin with reference to being brought out of Egypt from under Pharaoh’s rule?

A: It’s a reminder that they were “saved” to be under God’s rule rather than Pharaoh’s, called to be devoted to God rather than an earthly master. It’s a reminder that every generation/Believer is supposed to live a new, changed life.

Q: According to these verses the fall of Israel ultimately came about because “the sons of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God...” What are the three specific causes of their fall indicated in these verses?

- (v.7) “...feared other gods”
- (v.8) “...walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD had driven out...”
- (v.8) “...walked...in the customs of the kings of Israel which they introduced.”

Q: What does it mean to “fear” other gods?

A: “Fear” means “to respect”, “to be properly subject to”. The Israelites were not just looking at other gods, they were giving them the power, respect, and attributes once given to the One True God.

Q: What is the difference between the last two charges, walking “in the customs of the nations” and “in the customs of the kings of Israel”?

A: The “customs of the nations” were so despicable in God’s eyes that He used Israel as the tool of His judgment to drive them out and destroy them. Israel should have learned from this example what happens to a people when pursuing false gods. The “customs of the kings of Israel” refers to the fact that leadership over Israel became so corrupt as to replace the One True God with the ways of false gods. Israel was guilty first for succumbing to the ways of non-believers and secondly for knowingly following false leaders.

⁹The 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. ¹⁰They set for themselves sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, ¹¹and 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. ¹²They served idols, concerning which the LORD had said to them, “You shall not do this thing.”

[Read 9-12]

Q: List the 6 things in this passage that precisely specify the actions Israel undertook that resulted in their fall which was detailed in the previous verses.

- (v.9) “...did things secretly which were not right against the LORD...”
- (v.9) “...built for themselves high places...”
- (v.10) “...set for themselves sacred pillars and Asherim...”
- (v.11) “...burned incense on all the high places...”
- (v.11) “...did evil things provoking the LORD...”
- (v.12) “...served idols...”

Q: How is the first item – “...did things secretly which were not right...” – different from their other actions? What might it show about their relationship with God?

A: It probably shows a total and complete turning away from the Lord in that they not only **OPENLY** worshipped other gods but also **SECRETLY** turned to other gods. They had sold **both** their external and internal selves to another.

Q: What’s the significance of the reference to “Asherim”?

A: This is worship that involves sexual practices. Whereas most of the other acts of false worship might be an attitude or an external activity, this indicates giving over the physical body to false gods as well.

Q: What is the common trait in these actions?

A: They are all a conscience decision that replaces the One True God with a false god. Considering the many times that God has described Israel as a bride, taken together they are the documentation of Israel’s unfaithfulness in their relationship with Him. [For more on this, study the book of Hosea.]

¹³Yet 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.”

[Read 13]

Q: What was God’s first response to Israel’s unfaithfulness? Did He immediately execute judgment on them?

A: According to v.13 He “warned Israel...through all His prophets and every seer...” In other words, He relented to give them the opportunity to return to Him.

Q. What does God say the Israelites had to do to show that they were truly returning to God?

A: “...keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law...”

[Read 14-15]

Q: According to v.14, what was Israel’s response to God’s appeal for repentance communicated through His prophets and messengers?

- “...they did not listen...”
- “...stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe...”

Basically, they exhibited all the characteristics of disobedience and placed their self over God.

[Continued on the next page.]

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Q: What was the next step in their response? What did they reject outright?

- “...rejected His statutes...”
- “...and His covenant...”
- “...and His warnings...”

These cover the 3 major avenues through which God had communicated His will to them. “Statutes” refers to the law given through Moses, “covenant” to the promises given through Abraham and on down, and “warnings” to the messages sent through God’s prophets. It’s not just what was given through Moses, but before and after him as well, **ALL** of Scripture. It wasn’t like they were clinging to some of these as being more authoritative than the others, but were completely rejecting God on all levels.

Q: What was their final action? Who did they ultimately choose to follow?

A: “...they followed vanity and became vain, and went after the nations which surrounded them...” Another way of stating this is that they allowed pride to place their own self above God. Instead of being different, a witness to all the nations, they became no different than those whose customs were so offensive to God that He committed them to destruction.

[Read 16-17]

Q: At the end of v.17 Israel’s actions are summed up not as simple disobedience or “backsliding”, but as “provoking Him”. What are the things described in v.16 that were the result of their pride taking over and actually provoking God to judgment?

- (v.16) “...forsook all the commandments...” (Complete disobedience.)
- (v.16) “...made for themselves...images...” (Worshipped idols, things made by their own hand)
- (v.16) “...made an Asherah...” (Gave their bodies over to depraved worship)
- (v.16) “...worshiped all the host of heaven...” (Worshipped creation instead of the Creator.)
- (v.16) “...served Baal.” (The central false god worshiped by the Canaanite nations which God judged for destruction.)

All of these things require a conscience decision followed by indisputable actions to choose something to replace the One True God.

Q: According to v.17, how did they take their disobedience to “the next level” to pass over from sin and disobedience to works of evil?

- “...made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire...”
- “...practiced divination and enchantments...”
- “...sold themselves to do evil...”

Point: God gave His covenant, His promises through the time of Moses when He gave His law and instructions. In spite of disobedience He gave them even more time to repent by sending His prophets. Israel not only ceased listening but crossed over to actively engage in the works and practices of evil, to embrace the most hated of things by God. The picture here is something akin to public adultery in the face of one’s beloved.

¹⁶They forsook all the commandments of the LORD their God and made for themselves molten images, even two calves, and made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. ¹⁷Then they made their sons and their daughters pass through the fire, and practiced divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking Him.

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

¹⁹Also Judah did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. ²⁰The 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.

²¹When He had torn Israel from the house of David, they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king. Then Jeroboam drove Israel away from following the LORD and made them commit a great sin. ²²The sons of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them ²³until the LORD removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day.

[Read 18-23]

Q: What was the Lord's final response to the northern kingdom of Israel?

A: "...the LORD was angry...and removed them from His sight; none was left..." This is an example of final judgment. God provided the path to Him, warned them repeatedly when they strayed, and committed them to final destruction when they ignored all warnings to the contrary.

Point: What does it mean to be "removed" from God's sight?

Q: The chief difference between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah is that Israel, regardless of who was king, never strayed from the false worship and practices established by its first leader Jeroboam, whereas Judah occasionally returned to the Lord under some of their kings. What are the defining characteristics of Israel as stated in v.21-23?

- (v.21) Israel was driven "...away from following the LORD..."
- (v.22) "...walked in all the sins of Jeroboam..."
- (v.22) "...did not depart from them..."

Point: Although initial blame can be laid at Jeroboam's feet for leading them away, the fault is theirs to bear as they never departed from the wrong path, continually walking in it regardless of who was in charge or the many prophets' warnings from God. They were **led** astray but chose to **stay** astray.

Consider the following:

- God provides His covenant and promises through Abraham. Although there is more disobedience than obedience exhibited overall by Abraham's descendants, God provides opportunity to repent and return to Him.
- God not only rescues Israel from Egypt but provides the Law through Moses and even the land for their nation. God repeatedly disciplines their disobedience but continues to provide opportunity to repent and return to Him.
- In the destruction of the rebellious nations of Canaan God provides an example of what happens when one embraces ways other than those provided by Him.
- God provides judge after judge to lead Israel to repentance.
- God provides kings, many of which are an example of repentance.
- God provides prophets.
- It is only after rejection upon rejection of God's promises, covenants, laws and warnings from all these different sources that final judgment is rendered on people that have clearly rejected God and will not return to Him.

Now read 2 Kings 23:4-25 and observe what a righteous king of Judah did to undo all of the actions outlined above.

⁴Then the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the doorkeepers, to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. ⁵He did away with the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the host of heaven. ⁶He brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord outside

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Jerusalem to the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and ground it to dust, and threw its dust on the graves of the common people. ⁷He also broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the Lord, where the women were weaving hangings for the Asherah.

⁸Then he brought all the priests from the cities of Judah, and defiled the high places where the priests had burned incense, from Geba to Beersheba; and he broke down the high places of the gates which were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, which were on one's left at the city gate. ⁹Nevertheless the priests of the high places did not go up to the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, but they ate unleavened bread among their brothers.

¹⁰He also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech. ¹¹He did away with the horses which the kings of Judah had given to the sun, at the entrance of the house of the Lord, by the chamber of Nathan-melech the official, which was in the precincts; and he burned the chariots of the sun with fire. ¹²The altars which were on the roof, the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars which Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord, the king broke down; and he smashed them there and threw their dust into the brook Kidron.

¹³The high places which were before Jerusalem, which were on the right of the mount of destruction which Solomon the king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom the abomination of the sons of Ammon, the king defiled. ¹⁴He broke in pieces the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherim and filled their places with human bones.

¹⁵Furthermore, the altar that was at Bethel and the high place which Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel sin, had made, even that altar and the high place he broke down. Then he demolished its stones, ground them to dust, and burned the Asherah.

¹⁶Now when Josiah turned, he saw the graves that were there on the mountain, and he sent and took the bones from the graves and burned them on the altar and defiled it according to the word of the Lord which the man of God proclaimed, who proclaimed these things. ¹⁷Then he said, "What is this monument that I see?"

And the men of the city told him, "It is the grave of the man of God who came from Judah and proclaimed these things which you have done against the altar of Bethel."

¹⁸He said, "Let him alone; let no one disturb his bones." So they left his bones undisturbed with the bones of the prophet who came from Samaria.

¹⁹Josiah also removed all the houses of the high places which were in the cities of Samaria, which the kings of Israel had made provoking the Lord; and he did to them just as he had done in Bethel. ²⁰All the priests of the high places who were there he slaughtered on the altars and burned human bones on them; then he returned to Jerusalem.

²¹Then the king commanded all the people saying, "Celebrate the Passover to the Lord your God as it is written in this book of the covenant." ²²Surely such a Passover had not been celebrated from the days of the judges who judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel and of the kings of Judah. ²³But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah, this Passover was observed to the Lord in Jerusalem.

²⁴Moreover, Josiah removed the mediums and the spiritists and the teraphim and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might confirm the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord.

²⁵Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

Application:

We begin to replace God with other things one layer, one item or area at a time. Together they influence us to buy into more and more idols or “replacement gods” until we cross the line towards becoming not merely disobedient but completely rejecting God. Granted our idols today are not wood or stone statues, but you know very well the things that you have placed in higher priority than God, Which of these have become our present day false worship?

Like Josiah, we must completely destroy these things or cut off our association with them, because we cannot control their influence over us. Did you notice that removing the idols was not enough for Josiah? He not only carried them out of the temple (a symbol of our life and its lifestyle), not only broke them to pieces so they could not be re-used, but went so far as to completely remove the dust and ashes they’d become.

What is the Spirit prompting your heart to do?