

Lecture 20
A Nation in Trouble
Psalms 44, 74, 78, 80, 106, 137

Do you ever have the feeling this world is a mess . . . just stop it I want to get off? Does it seem like things were so much simpler in times past?

Will Durant made an observation that says, "Those who do not know history are forever doomed to repeat it." History may have bored you to death in school, or maybe you really enjoy the History channel now on TV, but there is no disputing the fact that history has lessons to teach us. . . especially Israel's history because they were God's chosen people through whom He revealed a great deal about Himself. We need to know what they did right and what they did to anger God. Our next lessons cover not only the fact that they were in trouble, but deliverance remembered and deliverance requested.

The thrust of today's lesson -- a nation in trouble -- begins with Psalm 44:1 "We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago." Think about that. Are you telling your children what God has done in your life? Are you passing down family traditions, family milestones -- especially of God's goodness in the circumstances of life?

Well, what did God do long ago? Let's go back to Genesis 12 where the story really begins.

God called Abraham to be the father of a great nation and made a covenant with him (that's a promise--and God always keeps His promises). Slowly God began to work His plan through Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons. In Genesis we learned how circumstances sent one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, to Egypt to prepare the way for the formation of the nation.

After Joseph died, the Israelites were put into bondage for a period of 400 years until God raised up Moses to lead the people to the land He'd promised Abraham. You remember the plagues that God sent to convince Pharaoh to "Let My people go." God miraculously parted the Red Sea and the Israelites crossed on dry ground and then came to camp at Mt. Sinai where God gave them instructions on 1) how to worship a Holy God; 2) how to live well together; and 3) how to establish an orderly society with civil and judicial guidelines. All of this is outlined in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. Many of you were with us when we did that study.

It would be nice to think that all the people said, "Amen -- so be it" and followed God's instructions wholeheartedly and completely. Instead they went the way of all flesh -- they grumbled and complained; they tested God's patience again and again; they openly rebelled; they tried to compromise by doing only part of what they were instructed to do; they would repent for a time, but then backslide with increasing regularity.

God chastised and punished them -- sometimes by giving them what they wanted like the manna and the quail, or making them wander in the desert for 40 years, and at other times by letting their enemies win victory after victory. But He delivered them again and again because of His great love. At one point God was ready to throw in the towel, wipe them out and begin again with Moses, but Moses interceded in a powerful way that you can read about in Exodus 32 if you've forgotten. It certainly gives us a real lesson on intercessory prayer for our own nation. (In fact, there are some sheets up here on the piano for a "40-Day program "Praying America Back to God.")

Today's psalms let us see the birthpangs of a nation . . . childish, demanding, temperamental, yet in God's eyes worth all the trouble because through Israel would come Jesus Christ - the Savior of all mankind.

For that very reason you and I should have more than a passing interest in Israel today. Last year we studied Revelation and prophecy and learned that there is still more trouble yet in store for Israel and the world -- far-reaching consequences for the way all nations continue to provoke God to wrath. You can't pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV news without the mid-east and Israel being a part of /or the center of world events.

In Psalm 44:17 we read, "all this happened to us though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant." Wait a minute -- didn't we just say Israel was perpetually disobedient? No, we need to keep it straight. Sometimes Israel was being obedient to God. . . sometimes they were on the straight and narrow. It's important to remember both sides of the coin. While national disaster is often a form of godly chastisement; nevertheless, Satan is still the ruler of this world and he likes nothing better than to bring confusion and turmoil on God's elect. Sometimes the godly do suffer unjustly. Chuck Colson said, "Life isn't like a book. Life isn't logical, sensible, orderly. Life is a mess most of the time and our theology must be lived in the midst of that mess." In other words bad things do happen to the godly and we have to ask, "Am I -- Do I trust God in this situation?"

Psalm 79, however, leaves no question. Israel was guilty of sin in that psalm. Right after the Red Sea crossing Psalm 79:21,22 ". . . His wrath rose against Israel for they did not believe in God or trust in His deliverance." He gave them manna -- they complained. He gave them quail -- they complained. Later He told them to take the land -- they didn't. Psalm 79:38-39 says "Yet He was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time He restrained His anger and did not stir up His full wrath. He remembered they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return."

Incredible mercy and grace!! (Not only to them but to us)

Once they were in the land and Joshua died, there was the period of the Judges. Psalm 106:43 "many times He delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin." Over and over again they'd cry out . . . God would deliver . . . they'd behave for a time then sin again. Cycle after cycle. In the days of Samuel, the people wanted a king like the other nations had. God said to Samuel, "They're not rejecting you -- they're rejecting Me." So God let them have their own way in their desire for an earthly king with full warnings that it wouldn't be what was best for them. So Israel was united under three kings Saul, David and Solomon for 120 years and then divided into the northern kingdom of ten tribes and the southern kingdom of two tribes ruled by some 40 different kings, only 8 of which were godly and they were all in the southern kingdom.

After years of long-suffering and patience with evil kings, God brought Assyria to carry off the northern kingdom into dispersion (ten tribes lost as a national entity). Later, the southern kingdom would be taken off by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in captivity.

It was only in captivity -- being taken completely away from their homeland did they truly appreciate what they had forfeited. Psalm 137:4 "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (the devotion on that was great) Jeremiah 25:3 says, "For 23 years the Word of the Lord has come to me and I have spoken to you again and again but you have not listened." This deportation and captivity was no whim of God -- they had been warned over and over through the prophets to repent and return to God.

Then in Jeremiah 29:4-14 it says: This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "I will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

I read that and think about how we too are tempted to listen to someone who will tell us what we want to hear -- maybe there's an easy way out. We don't need to hear what we want to hear . . . we need to hear the truth. Charles Spurgeon gave this instruction to those studying for the ministry: "Sermons should have real teaching in them . . . they should be solid, substantial, abundant. Absence of truth is like absence of flour from bread -- it will be fatal." God said 70 years are decreed for you to be out of the land because you did not give the land its Sabbath rest as I commanded you -- Jeremiah said, "70 years it will be . . . so make the best of it and learn and prosper from it." He told the truth.

Well, we know that many did settle down and prosper. In fact, when the time came to go back to Jerusalem as we read in Ezra and Nehemiah, not everybody went. Many had planted roots there and were comfortable. True to God's word, however, the remnant did return to the promised land and to rebuild Jerusalem.

God's words through Jeremiah also remind us there is always hope for a nation that will turn and repent and seek the face of God. God gave Israel a beginning based on freedom from oppression as they left Egypt. Our country's founding too was based on freedoms and godly principles.

In his book The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, which Edward Gibbon wrote in 1788, he defined five basic reasons why that particular civilization withered and died. One wonders whether the historians centuries from now will find a deadly parallel between the United States and Imperial Rome. Here are the flaws that Gibbon detected:

1. An undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis for human society.
2. Higher and higher taxes, and spending public money for free bread and circuses for the populace.
3. A mad craze for pleasure, with pastimes becoming every year more excited, brutal and immoral.
4. Building great armaments, although the real enemy is within - the decay of individual responsibility.

5. Decay of religion - faith fading into mere form, losing touch with lives and losing power to guide the people.

So, are we a nation in trouble? Does sin abound in any of these areas we consider institutions . . . the family unit? government and the judicial systems? business/economics? schools? leisure time? the church?

The problems associated with the family in this nation are numerous; . . . divorce, infidelity, teenage pregnancy, abortion, social disease, child abuse, abuse of the elderly, substance abuse (drugs, alcohol), acceptance of alternate lifestyles. You are indeed rare if none of these has touched you or someone else in your family.

Is our nation in trouble with the government and with the judicial system? Read today's paper. The guilty go free; courts are over-crowded; jails overflow; elected leaders seem to have their own set of ethical standards of conduct; laws are twisted under the guise of separation of church and state; policemen are the "bad guys" for trying to enforce the laws.

In our schools today many Christians are trying to exercise their influence and make their voice heard in trying to demand a return to godly values. Sometimes small victories do occur. But many problems remain -- including the attitude toward education itself. Too often it seems a "place to hang out till I'm 18." Free public education isn't seen as a privilege. We used to preach that you needed a college education to amount to anything -- today we see teen idols who know how to play a guitar make a million bucks. Win a lottery and live on easy street. Take the easy way out. The work ethic isn't only absent in the marketplace, it's sometimes sadly lacking in the schoolroom. Whenever and wherever we can it's imperative we encourage achievement in education. I had to laugh at a news report last week about a would-be bank robber who passed the teller a scribbled note that was supposed to have said, "Hand over the money. I have a gun." Well, the handwriting was so bad, she couldn't read it, so she passed it to the next teller who passed it on to the next, "Can you read this??" The man got so embarrassed, he fled without any money. The news commentators were joking he needed to go to Kinkos and get some cards typed up so he could just hand one of them over.

Is our economy in trouble? I'm no expert and I suppose if you're a Democrat or a Republican it could influence your opinion. Certainly the U. S. dollar isn't the only consideration anymore. We're all affected by the global economy. Personally, we've lost money in the stock market and we've made money in the stock market. We've had debt on credit cards and we've paid off credit cards. One thing I do know, however, from personal experience is that we're a nation caught up in materialism and consumerism. I've helped hold enough garage/estate sales to know we're all guilty. Sometime when you're cleaning or you're out in the garage, take a look at that top shelf in the kitchen or the bedroom closet or in the rafters. How many things haven't you touched for years? Whose going to hold a garage or estate sale for you and sell all the junk you've accumulated?

It's not a new saying -- I know you've heard it -- "What is the difference between men and boys? The only difference is the price of their toys." Leisure is big business. Just look at the record box office for the movie Titanic. We'd be astounded by the dollar volume spent on motorcycles, amusement parks, boats, planes, RV's . . . You name it. I'm not saying any of that in itself is bad. The problem is what leisure and its toys can do to you. Do you own it or does it own you? Does it in anyway affect your priorities of family, church, morality, responsible behavior? Is newer, bigger, faster a primary driving motivation?

I don't think there's any need for me to tell you - I'll just ask you - . . . are we a nation in trouble spiritually? Of course we are. That doesn't mean there aren't a lot of church buildings

or even church-going people, but is God's biblical truth ringing out triumphantly throughout our land? Sadly, I don't think so. There is a great spiritual darkness that needs the light of the world, Jesus Christ. Cults abound. It is Jesus crucified, resurrected and coming again that needs to be proclaimed.

Is the church universal making an impact? Oh, Lord, we hope so. We want to. God's people are a nation also wherever they reside around the world. But you know we quarrel among ourselves; we divide and separate. Sometimes our behavior dishonors the name of Jesus Christ.

We need to repent of a divisive spirit (not grumble like the Israelites did) . . . we need to repent of a judgmental attitude toward one another (God uses people with many different gifts) . . . we need to repent of our lack of love and acceptance of one another. We need to trust God to bring ultimate victory over the evils of this present world. We need to practice what we preach in our own lives . . . we need to follow the Great Commission.

2 Chronicles 7:14 is as true now as the day it was recorded when the Lord appeared to Solomon and said, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

As long as the Lord tarries before He comes again, all the nations of the earth will be in trouble, but the signs of the times point to His eminent return. We don't need to stop the world and get off. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Christians are only passing through with an urgent job to do while they're here. We can count on Jesus' words of truth: "In this world you will have trouble; but take heart, I have overcome the world."