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## To the Bitter End II Kings 17:1-41

**Intro:** It's been a long time in the making but like a slow motion train wreck, the demise of the northern kingdom of Israel has finally arrived. Its ultimate destruction was assured by its very first king but after more than 200 years, the day is here. We know the cause of her demise but let's look at some of the important details.

**1-6** – If you ever happen to leave the Baton Rouge Metro Airport and travel south on I110 at some point the Interstate makes a hard right turn and standing right in front of you is the Louisiana State Capitol building. It is so situated that it dominates the skyline and demands every driver's attention until the road turns away to the left again. This is an example of strategic visibility. The structure almost dares you to ignore it in its visual domination.

Our text here is like that. Six times in 4 verses the writer refers to the king of Assyria; his presence fills the landscape and draws our view. And, since the king of Assyria dominates the scene, Israel will be no more. The northern kingdom has lived in the shadow of Assyria for some time but now she is caught in the gravitational pull of the Empire and is enveloped into it like a leaf being swallowed into a whirlpool. The author's preoccupation with the king of Assyria is his way of getting us into the mood of this chapter.

We should remember Hoshea from **15:30**. He was one of 4 royal assassins mentioned in ch**15**. He kills king Pekah, the son of Remaliah and ascends to the throne. He was a king of Israel so he was evil, but not as evil as some of his predecessors. It appears that he picked the worst possible time to "take" the throne for himself because it seems that not long after his coup; Shalmaneser (**V**) came knocking on his door asking for donations to the Emperor's ball. Hoshea dutifully submitted and began to pay tribute. How could he not? When the biggest kid on the block says you have to give him your lunch money everyday or else – you just skip lunch.

Well, true to form, Hoshea tried to hire an Egyptian thug as a body guard for his kingdom, which also cost him his lunch money so there wasn't anything left to pay off the Assyrian thug. But, the thug at the door found out about

the Hoshea's deal with the thug on the next block and decided, "Why risk a fight with Egypt, just take out the stupid Israelite!" Old Shalley marched his army up to Samaria for an extended camp out and waited for them to capitulate; which they did. But this time, Assyria wasn't satisfied with just taking the king and some hostages – they took nearly everything and nearly everybody from Israel. They were deported as prisoners hundreds of miles to the northeast, deep into Assyrian territory. Israel's demise was more than just political fallout, it had a theological basis – it was the direct judgment of Yahweh against His stubbornly disobedient and adamantly unfaithful people.

**7-12** – This is the author's explanation of why the Assyrian war machine devoured and spit out Israel. At first glance you might assume it was because of the sin of idolatry but their rampant idolatry was just a *symptom* or *result* of their greater sin of ingratitude. Israel willfully sinned against the very God who delivered them out of the severe bondage of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (**7b**). Their God is a liberating God, a God who redeems from bondage but Israel didn't seem to care about that very much because they feared other gods (**7c**).

This passage reads like the Cliff Notes of the Book of Judges. 2 things really stand out in this description of Israelite religious practices: 1) the passion they have for it and 2) the standard they follow. Israel goes on a massive building project to erect high places and watch towers. She was hot after her perversion as she littered the land with pagan worship sites. It seems no expense or possible location was spared, from the most remote hamlets to her major urban areas. The "alls" and "everys" tell the story of a people in desperate pursuit of a wretched paganism.

Notice also her standard of worship. Israel walked in the statutes of the nations previously cast out of the land (**8a**). She faithfully made offerings on all the high places just like the Canaanites before her (**11a**), in direct disobedience to Yahweh's word. Moses told them to have no dealings with the Canaanites: no mercy, no covenants, no marriages and no curiosity about their worship practices. The reason for this prohibition is because Israel was holy to Yahweh. Being holy meant Israel was to be distinct, different, unique, unusual – unconventional. Sadly, Israel's history didn't follow Israel's calling. Instead, they were diligent in conforming to the religions of the pagan nations before them.

We must remember that, at its root, Israel's love affair with the pagan nations is a rejection of grace. **V7** presents Yahweh's seminal work of grace on behalf of Israel and places it in stark contrast to the apostasy that continually dominates her history. Israel's God has redeemed her from bondage and this is how she repays His grace. Amazing grace should have been met with lasting gratitude but it vanished early on. Redemption only finds rebellion. Could this be one reason the church celebrates the Lord's Supper so frequently? Maybe to keep our eyes focused and fastened on our Redeemer? The world can't so easily tempt us when grace holds us in the bonds of gratitude.

**13-17** – Israel's God is not only a God who redeems, He's also a God who warns. Before He brings His judgment, Yahweh brings His truth. After all the deliberate rebellion of the previous passage, we may expect to catch a whiff of brimstone in the air. Instead, the Lord warns them or testifies against them, pleading with them through His prophets to turn away from their sin and turn back to Him. He sends prophets to call His people back to the Law. This is the patience of Yahweh; this is His restraint, His kindness.

Of course, the prophetic warning received the wilderness response (**14**). The stiff neck alludes to a farmer dealing with an obstinate animal that refuses to bend down to accept the yoke. This was Israel from Sinai to Canaan. The Israelites were notoriously stiff-necked during their 40 years in the wilderness and this resistance stems from nothing other than unbelief. The exasperation of the writer in **v14** reflects that of God in **Num 14:11**. Where there is no real faith there can be no real fruit of faith, such as obedience and submission. True faith produces these characteristics in the heart of the one who holds that faith. Where unbelief rules, what more can you expect but a load of deaf ears, stiff necks and rebellious hearts?

So, we can be disappointed in **v15-17** but we can't be shocked. These verses are sad but not surprising. 3 verses of 10 phrases summarize 200+ years of northern kingdom infidelity. The 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase of **v15** is very telling: they followed idols, became idolaters. The Hebrew word translated idol is actually a value word that means vanity, worthless, futile or useless. This describes the true nature of false gods: they're nothing, zero, worthless. The phrase literally reads: they followed after worthlessness and became worthless.

Clearly, the worthlessness of these false gods was not without consequence. There's a sad transformation that takes place within the worshipper – they became like what they worship. This exposes the true danger of worshipping false gods. This is why worship is different from getting a new hair doo or wearing different colored socks. You can put on a surgeon's outfit but nobody is going to allow you to operate on them. The outfit doesn't change you into a surgeon. Worship, on the other hand, really does change you. You will become like what – or Whom – you worship.

The problem with this long list of apostasy (15-17) is that it tends to eclipse the revelation of God in v13. Here's the God who warns, who graciously sends His prophets to call His people away from their love of worthless idols. They are valuable to Yahweh. He has redeemed them and given them value. Becoming worthless was not part of His plan for Israel. Yet, the NT doesn't allow us to treat all this as ancient history (Heb 12:25). This NT verse assumes that Israel's apostasy is repeatable for professing Christians. To turn away from Him is to turn away from the Son of God who paved the way into the holy place with His own blood.

18-23 – Yahweh is a God who redeems and warns but He is also a God who judges. This section opens with the anger of Yahweh and closes with the land of Assyria; where Israel was exiled by God's judgment. The scope of this judgment appears to be complete: everyone was removed from the land. The writer makes a point to inform us that Judah still remained in the land but then goes on to allude that they weren't long from leaving either (19). Apparently, the same judgment is coming for Judah as well.

The cause of Yahweh's judgment is revealed in v21-22. Yahweh had torn the 10 tribes away from the house of David and graciously gave them to Jeroboam to shepherd but the impact of Jeroboam's reign had the opposite effect. Because of his actions in instituting a false system of worship, he banished or drove away Israel from following after Yahweh. The verb in v22 says that Israel continued walking in the sins of Jeroboam and that for over 200 years! It turns out that Israel did have it in them to be faithful, just not to God. They stepped into their historical graves still worshipping Jeroboam's stupid golden calves.

Above everything else, we see the tragedy of Yahweh's judgment. What did

exile mean for Israel? 3 times (18a, 20b, 23a) the author declares that Yahweh removed or cast Israel from His sight. To be removed from someone's sight is to be removed from their presence. What does this mean for Israel? In part, it means being removed from the Promise Land as is indicated by 23b. This doesn't mean to infer that God was restricted to the land of Israel. It's just that the Promise Land was to be the primary arena in which Yahweh's purposes for His people were to be fulfilled.

But that doesn't catch all of the tragedy of this judgment. I think being removed or cast out from Yahweh's presence involves more than just a change of geographical scenery. More importantly, it speaks of fellowship. It's not just a change in location; it's a rejection of God's presence and nothing is sadder than that. Of course, the real question is: Did Israel recognize this aspect of the judgment? They had every opportunity over the last 200+ years to seek and enjoy Yahweh's presence but they failed to do it and they failed to do it for so long, I wonder if they noticed that they no longer had the opportunity.

We must understand that being removed from the Lord's presence may involve more than just ending up in Assyria

**24-41** – Since Israel has been removed from the land, Assyria took the opportunity to move in some other conquered peoples into the area. This forced immigration came with some unintended consequences – they always do, but in this particular case, becoming cat chow was completely unexpected. These new immigrants brought in all of the traditional idolatries of their respective cultures but these did little to address the glaring (or roaring) problem of the day: how do we appease the God of this new land if we don't know who He is or what He wants from us? We're all familiar with the concept of a job fair: representatives from different companies come together to offer opportunities for employment to the available workforce. What we have in this section is a veritable religion fair. Each group of new immigrants has brought their religious preferences and as varied as they are, they all fall under 4 main categories.

1) Coping religion (24-28) – It seems in Israel, you didn't need to worry about the wolf at your door because the lion will take you out before you got home. Imagine 3 years of an Assyrian invasion and siege. Think of all the bodies left to rot in the open. The Assyrians weren't going to bother with

burying them and there weren't enough Israelites around to do the job – cue the lions! It's no wonder that their numbers exploded in the area, what with all that available carrion to munch on. But, when they ran out of rotten humans, they started picking off the fresh ones.

Now this wasn't just survival of the fittest, there's a theological reason behind these attacks. These new imports didn't fear Yahweh so He sent the lions among them (welcome wagon?). These pagans realized the problem quick enough and sent a request for some religious instruction concerning the God of the land. So the king of Assyria sent back one of the exiled priests to teach them. I wish someone could have told him he was wasting his time! Israelite priests failed to instruct the Israelites on the proper way to worship Yahweh.

There's a bit of irony here; these new residents behaved better than the Israelites. They at least wanted to pacify Yahweh, which was more than Israel ever tried to do. This lion scourge was their opportunity to turn to Yahweh in truth but that wasn't likely to happen with a northern priest as their evangelist. He was predisposed to Jeroboam's style of religion so they had to settle for whatever worked. Getting rid of the lions was the main problem and if some kind of recognition of Yahweh eliminates that problem then that's all that matters. That's what religion is for, right – to help one cope with the troubles and tensions of life.

The problem with a coping religion is that it's merely practical but can also be manipulative. We just want to get rid of the lions so we need a protective faith that charms away our troubles, the deals with threats to our security. The big question is not: is it true, but does it work to avoid discomfort; to ward off disaster? The fallacy of this kind of religion is the assumption that God is supposed to make life safe. He is my existential pacifier and if He can't guarantee my safety, what good is He? A coping religion says that God should at least get rid of the lions.

2) Creative religion (29-33) – The new residents were very religious and wasted no time in installing their own gods and worship centers. Good thing Israel was so pagan; it saved them the trouble of building all the shrines and high places. The operative word here is the condemning verb make (made); used 6 times to describe the making of gods. It's used so much here you suspect the author is being sarcastic. Pagan religion is DIY devotion.

Creative religion is what you make of it! It's comprehensive and ecumenical: you can worship Yahweh and serve your own favorite gods. You can make it whatever you like. What's true takes 2nd place behind what I enjoy. What I prefer rules!

Pagan religion creates what it likes; biblical faith receives what is revealed. Pagans worship based on what they prefer; biblical worship can only be based on what God declares or reveals. The pagan worshipper can concoct but the biblical worshipper must submit. That's the difference between a creative religion and a correct religion. When pagan religion is mixed with true worship then all you have is another pagan religion.

3) Covenant religion (34-40) – V33 says these new residents feared the Lord while v34 denies this! This is not a blatant contradiction; this is merely the author establishing a particular point of view in 33 so he can demolish it in 34. V33 drips with irony – if they're serving their own gods then they don't fear the Lord as they should. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom but that's just the start. As we have seen, that initial wisdom of fear moves on to faith then submission and obedience. These new residents were not following a covenant religion (34b).

Notice the exclusive nature of covenant religion (35-37). Covenant religion is exclusive religion, a faith that destroys our both-ands and insists on its either-ors. Israel had no stomach for covenant religion. They preferred the cafeteria plan, the smorgasbord of Canaanite religious was just too tempting. But covenant religion won't allow that. It carries a fundamental intolerance at its center: Yahweh or other gods. If Jesus is Lord then all other competitors must be excluded from your life. Pagan religions aren't like this. False gods don't care how many of their competitors you may worship. Only biblical, covenant religion carries this virulent animosity towards all would-be competitors. One might suspect that this unique, exclusive religion is also the true religion.

4) Condemning religion (41) – We've seen it before; they sell themselves to idolatry and their offspring follow along in lockstep down through the years. One generation embraces falsehood and virtually dooms their descendents unless God graciously interrupts the cycle of doom. A legacy can be a frightening thing and v41 exudes an air of hopelessness as succeeding generations follow the vain commitments of the former ones. Religion isn't

necessarily a good thing. There's such a thing as a condemning religion; religion that damns it's adherents to eternal suffering.

Bleak is the word for ch17, yet there's a minute glimmer of light for Israel in 39b. But the hope of this deliverance will depend on whether they fear Yahweh enough to submit to Him and obey His statutes and commandments.

After over 200 yrs and 19 kings from Solomon, the northern kingdom finally fell. They weren't destroyed because Yahweh was no longer able to help them but because they had so forsaken their covenant God and ignored His guidance that He finally stopped actively protecting them and allowed them to rot and degrade according to the desires of their hearts. 😊