

PROMISED LAND 2: Lesson Ten,
The Sealing of Judah's Destiny Despite Recovery Efforts
2 Kings 15-23, 2 Chronicles 26-35, Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah

Subject: Some of Judah's later kings attempted reform, but the sins of pride and idolatry were too deeply entrenched.

Main Idea: Pride and idolatry are twin sins in which God is set aside in favor of someone or something else.

Principles:

1. *Although pride is often culturally encouraged, God hates pride (Proverbs 6:16, 8:13).*
2. *Idolatry is putting our trust in anything or anyone other than God.*

Introduction

This lesson is about a set of twins. Many adore the twins of which I speak, but there is nothing cute about them. They are the deadly twin sins of pride and idolatry, sins that took down God's people. They are "twins" because they both set God aside in favor of someone or something else.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. as a result of God's judgment. They had disregarded their covenant with the Lord, and as a result, His curses fell on them. The Southern Kingdom of Judah remained another 136 years. The question was whether it would fare any better. Would Judah be enchanted by the same set of twins that had beguiled Israel and the pagan nations around them? As it turned out, they were. Once these sins were entrenched in their hearts, their destiny was sealed, despite several good kings' efforts to initiate spiritual revival.

I. **Judah's Kings During Israel's Last Years** (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah) – 2 Kings 15-20, 2 Chronicles 26-28

A. **Uzziah** ("Azariah," used in 2 Kings 15, is a variant spelling)

- i. **Uzziah's Success:** King Uzziah ruled Judah 52 years, roughly the same time period in which Jeroboam II had ruled Israel. As we learned, a wane in Assyrian imperialism allowed for greater prosperity in Palestine during this period. Uzziah came to the throne at only 16 years of age. A godly man named Zechariah mentored him, he sought the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:5), and his early years were marked with success.
 1. Uzziah had a well-equipped army and was successful militarily. He led campaigns against the Philistines and the Arabs, to Judah's south, and received tribute from the Ammonites in the east. His fame spread as far as Egypt.
 2. Peace with his neighbors and prosperity within the land freed him to build. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of many of his projects. One of his great achievements was the capture and rebuilding of Elath, the port city at the mouth of the Red Sea where Solomon had fleets for importing and exporting ventures. He invested a great deal in agriculture because of his love for the soil.

- ii. Uzziah's Pride: Like his father Amaziah and grandfather Joash, Uzziah's life was characterized by faithfulness until his power made him prideful. He even presumed to take the role that belonged only to the priests, offering incense on the altar in the Lord's Temple. A host of brave priests confronted him and while he was raging against them, he suddenly became leprous. As a result, Uzziah was forced to live in seclusion the remainder of his days. His son Jotham became co-regent. In the year Uzziah died, the Lord commissioned the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1).

B. Jotham

- i. A Godly King with Ungodly People: Like his father, Jotham was a builder, had military success, and grew powerful. Unlike his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, he remained steadfast in his devotion to the Lord throughout his lifetime. Despite Jotham's personal godliness, the people of Judah "continued in their corrupt practices" (2 Chronicles 27:2). This telling statement reminds us that the blame for Israel and Judah's demise did not belong to their leaders alone.
- ii. Tiglath Pileser: During Jotham's reign, Tiglath-Pileser came to Assyria's throne, bringing an end to the long period of peace and prosperity in Israel and Judah.

C. Ahaz

- i. Ahaz's Wickedness
 1. Jotham's son Ahaz was a wicked king. Instead of modeling himself after his father, he followed in the ways of the kings of Israel, worshipping the Baals, offering sacrifices and burning incense at the high places. He even sacrificed his own children in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, the valley to the south of the Temple where city refuse was later burned. The Mosaic Law vehemently condemned human sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21). The prophet Jeremiah referred specifically to this valley and the Ammonite god Molech (with whom human sacrifices were particularly associated) in his condemnations (Jeremiah 7:31-32, 19:2-6, 32:35). Because of its continuously smoldering fires, over time the valley's name became synonymous with hell (Matthew 5:22, 10:28; 18:9, Mark 9:43, Revelation 19:20, 20:10-15). The Greek name for it is "Gehenna" (derived from the word "valley" and the proper name "Hinnom").
 2. Ahaz was not only more evil than any of Judah's earlier rulers (even in the days of Athaliah a century earlier), he was worse than any northern kings of Israel. 2 Chronicles 28:3 compares him to the Canaanites, that vile people group the Lord had commanded Israel to destroy.

- ii. Ahaz's Enemies: The Lord sent enemies against Ahaz on all sides. The Philistines mounted attacks from the southwest and the Edomites attacked him from the southeast. The kings of Aram and Israel raided Judah from the north and carried away many prisoners. The Arameans took many to Damascus (2 Chronicles 28:5). However, a prophet named Oded met the Israelite army on its return to Samaria and insisted that their southern relatives were returned. Amazingly, the Israelites listened and obeyed.
- iii. The Lord's Offer of Help: Ahaz wasn't convinced Israel's goodwill would last. The Lord graciously sent him word through Isaiah to remain calm and not act rashly. The Lord assured him that, in just a few years, Samaria and Damascus would be too shattered by the Assyrians to remain a threat to them any longer. Isaiah offered Ahaz a sign as proof, but Ahaz refused the Lord's offer. In the context of this rejection, Isaiah prophesied, "The Lord Himself *will* give you a sign – the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14 [my emphasis]). The prophecy contrasts the complete submission of Jesus the Messiah to God's will with Ahaz' complete rejection of it.
- iv. Ahaz's Desperate Alliance
 - 1. Although the Lord was very willing to help Ahaz, he turned instead to Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, and willingly became his vassal. He plundered the temple, the royal palace, and his officials in order to pay the required tribute. On one occasion, he met with Tiglath-Pileser in the Aramean capital of Damascus and was so impressed with an altar he saw there that he had a duplicate constructed in Jerusalem. He moved the bronze altar in front of the Lord's Temple to the north side and replaced it with the new pagan altar.
 - 2. In response to Ahaz's concerns (but perhaps more for his own benefit), Tiglath-Pileser did take Damascus, as well as some of Israel's northern and eastern territories. He put Rezin, king of Aram, to death (2 Kings 16:9) and deported many Aramean and northern Israelite citizens (2 Kings 15:29, 16:9). However, the peace Ahaz bought was short-lived, for in the end, Tiglath-Pileser "gave him more trouble than help" (2 Chronicles 28:20), and a few years later, he even attacked Ahaz's son Hezekiah.
- v. Co-Regency: Although the Scriptures do not mention it, it is possible that Ahaz's son Hezekiah was co-regent in the latter years of his reign (this would explain an apparent discrepancy with regard to the years of their reigns in relation to the reign of Hoshea given in 2 Kings 18). 2 Kings 18:10 says that Samaria fell to Assyria in *Hezekiah's* sixth year, which apparently was the sixth year of his co-regency with Ahaz.

D. Hezekiah: It is hard to believe that a king as wicked as Ahaz could father a son as godly as Hezekiah! Hezekiah ruled Judah for 29 years. His mother was the daughter of Zechariah, quite possibly the godly man who had mentored Uzziah.
Re-Establishment of Temple Worship

1. *Purification:* Hezekiah's first order of business was to restore the Temple. He called together the priests and Levites, confessed Judah's sin, and had the Temple purified from all the defilement that had occurred during his father's reign. His work on the Temple and the involvement of the priests and Levites is reminiscent of the preparations for the Temple made by David. In fact, several references compare him to David (2 Kings 18:3, 20:5-6 and 2 Chronicles 29:25-30, 30:26). After the Temple was purified, Hezekiah made sin offerings. The instruments that had belonged to David accompanied singing to the Lord while the sacrifices were made, and Hezekiah and all the people rejoiced.
2. *Israel's Fall:* It was during Hezekiah's reign that the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell under God's judgment to the Assyrians and most of its people were deported. This meant Hezekiah was the only remaining Israelite king in the land. In a sense, the kingdom was no longer divided.
3. *The Passover:* Hezekiah sent word to *all* Israel and Judah (2 Chronicles 30:1), inviting them to celebrate the Passover, urging the people of the north to return to the Lord and reminding them of the Lord's grace and compassion. Most of the people ridiculed the message, but some humbled themselves and joined the celebration. In fact, some of them settled in the towns of Judah (2 Chronicles 31:6). The Law of Moses required that the Passover be celebrated annually, but according to 2 Chronicles 30:26, it had not been celebrated at large since the days of Solomon! This made Hezekiah's Passover a time of exceptional joy. Passover was also a time for remembering what God had done on behalf of His people and these recollections surely made the occasion all the more joyous.
4. *Tithing Reinstated:* In keeping with his reforms, King Hezekiah also reinstated the system of offerings the Law required to support the priests and Levites. He personally gave generously and ordered the people to bring their offerings. So overwhelming was the response that Hezekiah had to build storerooms for the surplus. In accordance with the Mosaic Law, the offerings were distributed to the priests throughout the land, allowing them enough freedom from occupational work in to perform their Temple duties.

ii. Hezekiah's Trials

1. *Assyrian Greed*: Although Hezekiah's father Ahaz had invited Assyria to take Judah as a vassal state, Hezekiah rebelled against Assyria (2 Kings 18:7). Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded Judah and began capturing Judean cities (2 Kings 18:13). At first, Hezekiah foolishly agreed to pay tribute and took money from the temple and palace to pay it. However, this did not satisfy the Assyrian king and he went ahead with his plans to take Jerusalem.
2. *Hezekiah's Preparations*: Hezekiah took some practical measures for defense. He consulted with his officials and military staff, repaired the broken sections of the wall around Jerusalem, built another wall outside that one, made many weapons, and blocked off springs and streams from which the Assyrians could benefit. He also appointed officers over the people, assembled his troops, and encouraged them in the Lord. It may have been at this time that Hezekiah built his famous tunnel (2 Chronicles 32:30) to ensure a permanent water supply to the residents inside the city walls. His men dug through solid rock a distance of 1,777 feet, from the Gihon Spring, outside Jerusalem, to the Pool of Siloam, inside the city. In an amazing engineering feat, they dug from both ends and somehow met exactly in the middle! Water still flows today through the tunnel.
3. *The Threatening Message*: While the Assyrians were fighting southwest of Jerusalem at Lachish, Sennacherib sent a message through his commander to terrorize the residents of Jerusalem and ridicule the Lord. He proudly boasted that "no god of any nation or kingdom has been able to deliver his people from my hand" (2 Chronicles 32:15), called out in the people's native Hebrew tongue to make them afraid, and claimed the Lord Himself told him to march against Judah (2 Kings 18:25).
4. *Hezekiah's response* was so exemplary that it is recorded in three books of the Bible (2 Kings 18, 2 Chronicles 32, Isaiah 36-37). Unlike Ahaz, who completely rejected Isaiah and the Lord's offer of help, Hezekiah sent for Isaiah and together they cried out to the Lord (2 Chronicles 32:20). We can learn much from Hezekiah's prayer (2 Kings 19:15-19).
 - a. He began by recognizing the Lord's greatness. Recognizing who God is in our prayers always puts our problems into perspective.

- b. Then, Hezekiah acknowledged Sennacherib's threat. He spread out the message on the floor as a reminder that the true offense was not against him but against God and was God's to handle. In this way, he symbolically handed over his trouble to the Lord.
 - c. Finally, he asked for deliverance *so that the Lord might be glorified among the nations of the earth*. Hezekiah saw his problem as an opportunity for God to receive glory, even from unbelievers. We can also petition God from this point of view.
5. *The Lord's Answer*: The Lord answered Hezekiah through Isaiah, assuring him that everything would soon change. The Assyrians would go back by the same route they came (2 Kings 19:21-34) and there, Sennacherib would be killed (2 Kings 19:6-7). That very night, the angel of the Lord went throughout the Assyrian camp and put 85,000 soldiers to death. Sennacherib withdrew and returned to Nineveh (2 Kings 19:35-36), where his sons murdered him.
- iii. Hezekiah's Illness
1. Sometime either during Hezekiah's crisis with Assyria or shortly after, he became deathly ill. Again, Hezekiah sought the Lord through Isaiah. The Lord assured him he would recover and gave him a miraculous sign as proof. Indeed, the Lord added fifteen years to Hezekiah's life. However, according to 2 Chronicles 32:25-26, Hezekiah became proud. It is unclear whether his pride was somehow related to his recovery or whether he was proud of his great wealth and honor. It could have been both, for immediately following these verses is the account of the Babylonian envoys who brought Hezekiah gifts to congratulate him on his recovery and inquire about the sign. During their visit, Hezekiah foolishly showed them all his treasures. 2 Chronicles 32:31 says, "God left him to test him and know everything that was in his heart." Obviously, God already knew what was in Hezekiah's heart, but he wanted *Hezekiah to see* that pride had crept in (2 Chronicles 32:25-26).
 2. Afterward, Isaiah told him that a time was coming when those same people would return and carry off all they had seen to Babylon, leaving absolutely nothing behind. 2 Chronicles 32:25-26 indicates that the Lord became angry with Hezekiah, Judah, and Jerusalem because of Hezekiah's pride. But because he repented, "the Lord's wrath did not come on them during the days of Hezekiah." The indication, however, is pride was not only a sin of Hezekiah but of all Judah.

Summary Statement: The wicked Ahaz depended on pagan nations and their gods for assistance, but the good kings Uzziah and Hezekiah struggled more with priding themselves.

Hezekiah's pride was symptomatic of what was wrong with all Judah and ultimately led to her downfall. In Amos 6:8, the Lord declared, "I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses; I will deliver up the city and everything in it."

Principle: *Although pride is often culturally encouraged, God hates pride (Proverbs 6:16, 8:13).*

After we have walked with the Lord for a while, the sins that plague us are less likely to be the outward ones and more likely to be those in our hearts and minds, like pride. Sometimes, we may say we are proud of someone or something, meaning that we are happy about something good, and that is not the same thing. The sin of pride has to do with self-dependence or self-focus. God hates pride because it steals the glory that is due Him alone.

The stronger, more successful, more powerful we become, the easier it is to become proud. Satan is a frightening example. The Scriptures speak of him as having been created full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. He fell because he became proud (Ezekiel 28:12-19). Yet we would make a mistake to think that only the strong and successful may struggle with pride. A famous Harvard psychologist observed, "Any neurotic is living a life which in some respects is extreme in its self-centeredness... the region of his misery represents a complete preoccupation with himself." Those who are overly sensitive, resentful or tend to find fault or raise petty objections may fear they won't "appear to advantage in competitive situations where [he or she] wants to show his worth." A chronically indecisive person "is showing fear that he may do the wrong thing and be discredited. If he is over-scrupulous and self-critical, he may be endeavoring to show how praiseworthy he really is." The psychologist concludes, "From the point of view of religion [most of these disorders] are mixed with the sin of pride."ⁱ

Application: We can't overcome pride by trying to be humble, because the more we try, the more focused we are on ourselves. A good way to deal with pride is through *worship*.

- Singing is one way to worship. The lyrics of many "worship songs" today are more about the worshipper than they are about the Lord. Nevertheless, there are many wonderful choruses and hymns that exalt Him, and when we sing them, all thoughts of self disappear and our hearts soar to His throne.
- We can also worship the Lord in prayer. The Bible is full of worshipful prayers. Hezekiah prayed, "Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth" (2 Kings 19:15). Have you learned to worship in prayer? A simple way to do this is to start with the words, "Lord, You are" and complete the sentence by naming one or more of His attributes or names. For example, Hezekiah said, "You are God over all the kingdoms of the earth." Starting there, we might add, "Lord, *You are* in charge of all that goes on

in those kingdoms. *You are stronger than any earthly power. You are God Almighty!*” When we begin our prayers with these kinds of statements, we take our focus off ourselves and put it solely on God. Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession will inevitably flow from these, but try beginning your prayers with words that simply magnify Him for who He is. I find the custom of praying on one’s knees to be a helpful reminder of my own smallness and God’s greatness.

- In addition to prayer and singing, there are other ways to worship. Some believers find that worship comes quite naturally when they spend time in nature. If you live in a city without parks or much greenery, examining a single flower or houseplant will also leave us in awe of our great Creator and His attention to every detail.
- Although it is important to dedicate certain times specifically for worship, worship should become as natural to the Christian as breathing. It should take place in our hearts and minds and on our lips all throughout each day.

God hates pride, and if we don’t do something about our pride, He probably will! But there *is* something we can do. We can worship. Worship is an antidote to pride.

Transition: During the fifteen extra years for which Hezekiah begged the Lord, a son named Manasseh was born to him.

II. **The Beginning of the End** – 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35, Nahum, Zephaniah

A. Manasseh

- Manasseh’s Idolatry: Manasseh undid all the good his father Hezekiah had done and led Judah into even greater evil than had Ahaz. He rebuilt the high places, the altars to Baal and the Asherah poles. He worshipped the pagan gods of the sun, moon, and stars, and placed altars to them and an image of Asherah within the Lord’s temple. Like his grandfather Ahaz, he offered his own sons as human sacrifices. He also practiced divination (attempting to interpret the future by omens) and witchcraft.
- Manasseh’s Blood Purge: On top of all the sins of Ahaz, Manasseh shed much innocent blood. Of course, his own children whom he sacrificed were among these, as well as the children of those who followed his example. However, he may have also undertaken a blood purge of the prophets, for there are no prophets in the Old Testament canon from his time and according to Jewish tradition, Manasseh had Isaiah sawn in two.ⁱⁱ
- The Impact of Manasseh’s Long Reign: Over Manasseh’s 55-year reign (the longest of any king of Israel or Judah), idolatry and wickedness became deeply entrenched in Judah’s culture. Unlike other kings, whose reigns mostly lasted for a generation or two at most, Manasseh had the opportunity to impact not only his peers and the generation of their children, but also their grandchildren.

The Lord spoke to Manasseh and the people, but they paid no attention. Any prophet the Lord sent probably lost his life. 2 Kings 21:9-11 says, “Manasseh led Judah into sin with his idols” so that they “did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites.” Therefore, the Lord decreed judgment on Jerusalem, saying He would bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who heard of it would tingle (2 Kings 21:12-15). That judgment did not come in full in Manasseh’s day, but it was inevitable. Meanwhile, the King of Assyria put a hook in Manasseh’s nose and took him to Babylon in shackles.

- iv. Manasseh’s Repentance: Manasseh was greatly humbled in Babylon and cried out to the Lord. The Lord was merciful to him, brought him back to Jerusalem, and restored him to the throne. After that, Manasseh got rid of his foreign gods, removed the altars he built, and restored the Lord’s altar, but he could not fully undo the damage done in Judah over several generations (2 Chronicles 33:17).
- v. Amon: Manasseh’s son Amon had a short, evil, two-year reign. He was conspired against and murdered in his palace. The people of the land made his son Josiah king in his place. About the same time, major world powers were realigning, with Assyria weakening and Egypt and Babylon coming to the front.

B. Josiah: Some of Judah’s godly kings had wicked sons. On other occasions, some of Judah’s evil kings had godly sons. Such was the case with Amon and his son Josiah. It is a true testament to God’s grace and also to the responsibility every individual bears for his or her own choice to follow or reject the Lord. Josiah was Judah’s king par excellence and he came to power at the very time of this power shift in the region. Josiah was only eight years old when he became king and he reigned 31 years, doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord and completely following the ways of his forefather David. He sought the Lord from the time he was young.

- i. Josiah’s Reforms: In the twelfth year of his reign (at age 20), he began a major campaign to reform Judah. He purged the land of idols, tore down worship sites and desecrated pagan altars, not only in Judah but also throughout Israel. He desecrated the altar at Bethel built by Jeroboam, son of Nebat, which had led Israel into the idolatry associated with the golden calves. This desecration occurred in fulfillment of prophecy given three hundred years earlier (1 Kings 13:2) in which Josiah was mentioned by name! He also desecrated the altar on which human sacrifices to Molech had been made in the Valley of Ben Hinnom.

ii. Discovery of the Book of the Law

1. In the eighteenth year of his reign (at age 26), Josiah repaired the Temple. While working there, Hilkiah the priest discovered the Book of the Law of the Lord. Apparently, the scrolls had been lost (or forgotten) during the long years in which the Temple had been misused and neglected. Hilkiah gave the “book” to the secretary, Shaphan, the who read it to Josiah. Moses had required that every king write out his own copy of the Law (Deuteronomy 17:18), yet Josiah and never even had it read to him before this time!
2. When Josiah heard the words of the Law and understood how great was Judah’s offense against the Lord, he tore his robes and ordered Hilkiah and Shaphan to inquire of the Lord. They went to Huldah, a prophetess, who told them that the Lord planned to bring all the curses on Judah written in the Law. That had been settled at the time of Manasseh. However, because Josiah had humbled himself, the Lord said it would not happen in his lifetime.
3. Josiah called all the people of the land to the Temple and had the entirety of the Law read in their hearing. Since the printing press was not invented for more than another two millennia, in those days, in order for the people to hear the Law, it had to be read to them from the scrolls kept in the Temple. After it was read, Josiah renewed the covenant with the Lord and commanded the people to also pledge themselves to it.

- iii. Josiah’s Passover Celebration: In accordance with the Law, Josiah also celebrated the Passover. 2 Chronicles 35:18 says, “The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel.” The celebration must have been even greater than that in Hezekiah’s day.
- iv. The Lord’s Anger: During Josiah’s lifetime, the people followed the Lord (2 Chronicles 34:33). However, their repentance was a superficial one. Apparently, they did as Josiah commanded, but their hearts were essentially unchanged. The prophet Jeremiah put it this way: “Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense” (3:10). 2 Kings 23:26 says, “The Lord did not turn away from the heat of His fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to arouse His anger.” The impact of the many years of pride and idolatry under Manasseh’s influence was irreversible.
- v. Josiah’s Death: About fourteen years into Josiah’s reforms, the Babylonians had overrun the southern portion of Assyria, and fearing that the Babylonians might come too far south, Pharaoh Neco of Egypt took his forces and set out to aid Assyria. For unknown reasons, Josiah attempted to intercept Pharaoh, was wounded in battle with him, and later died.

- vi. Prophets of Josiah's Day: The prophetic ministries of Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah and possibly Obadiah paralleled Josiah's reign. Jeremiah, Obadiah and Habakkuk will be covered in Lesson 11.

C. Nahum

i. The City of Nineveh

1. Nineveh was one of the great cities of the ancient world, situated in what is now northern Iraq. Today, the portions that remain exist under two mounds, one of which has been named in Arabic "Prophet Jonah" and on which a mosque sits today that claims to house Jonah's tomb. According to the Biblical record in Genesis, its origins can be traced to the beginning of human civilization. Nimrod founded it (along with Babylon) as one of his many kingdoms (Genesis 10:11).
2. Several Assyrian kings enlarged and strengthened the city, but it was Sennacherib (the Assyrian king who threatened Hezekiah) who made it the Assyrian capital. He is credited for having built a system of canals that controlled the flow of the Khosr River and carried its waters through the middle of the city, around which were beautiful parks, gardens with scented plantsⁱⁱⁱ and zoological collections. He also built administrative buildings and a palace with walls 75 feet high and so wide that three chariots could sit abreast atop them. The walls had 15 gates, several of which have been excavated. Beyond that, he built a much longer outer wall. The walls are covered in reliefs depicting Assyrian military victories. In his day, Nineveh doubled in size, making it the largest known city of the ancient world.
3. Assyrian literature is better known than that of any other ancient Semitic peoples, except the Hebrews. Archaeologists have also uncovered a library in Nineveh, founded by Sennacherib's grandson Ashurbanipal (Assyria's last great king), containing 25,000 tablets. Among these are seven that preserved a Babylonian creation story and twelve that bore the Epic of Gilgamesh, a variation of the Bible's flood story.
4. The Assyrians worshipped at the Temple of Nabu, the god of writing, arts and sciences.^{iv} According to the Bible, Sennacherib worshipped a god named Nisroch (2 Kings 19:37, Isaiah 37:38). Assur was another important Assyrian god, although Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, was the patron deity of the capital city Nineveh. Nineveh used lions, portrayed with wings and human heads, to symbolize Assyrian strength.

ii. Nahum's Message

1. At the time of Nahum and King Josiah, 150 years after Jonah preached to the Ninevites and nearly 100 years after Samaria had fallen to Assyria, Nineveh was about to be overthrown. Nahum portrays the city as a symbol of violence and conquest. It grew rich at the expense of the nations it plundered. Assyria had been God's instrument in punishing His people, but the Assyrians did not recognize Him as the source of their strength and took credit for their success. Nahum's message was that a holy God would not allow evil to go unpunished. He would destroy Nineveh because of Assyrian violence and pride. He depicted the city as a lion and a prostitute (reflecting the symbol it took [the lion] and its patron deity [the goddess of love and war]) on the verge of destruction.
2. Nineveh fell to the Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians in 612 B.C., just as Nahum predicted. It has been suggested that the Medes and Babylonians may have closed the floodgates of the river that ran into the city. In the ruins, traces of the original gates show evidence that the water flow could be reduced or increased. Perhaps when the reservoirs were completely full, the enemy forces threw the floodgates open, causing so much pressure that the walls around them collapsed. The first century B.C. Greek historian Diodorus Siculus corroborated this idea, writing that the waters of the river destroyed Nineveh's fortifications and the king and his retinue committed suicide by throwing themselves into the flames.^v Amazingly, Nahum 2:6 foretells the opening of the river gates and the collapse of the palace.
3. His prophecy ends, "Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty?" (3:19). The fall of Nineveh seriously weakened the Assyrian Empire, but the capital city was moved (twice) and the empire survived a few more years. In 609 B.C., the Egyptian forces came to Assyria's defense against the Medes and Babylonians. Josiah attempted to stop Pharaoh Neco and was killed. In 605 B.C., the Babylonians defeated the joint forces of Egypt and Assyria in the Battle of Carchemish (Assyria's newest capital), and the Assyrians and Egyptians never regained world power.

D. Zephaniah

- i. Zephaniah's Background and Theme: Zephaniah claimed to be the great-grandson of Hezekiah, very possibly Hezekiah the king. He was most likely born during the evil reign of Manasseh. His name means, "the Lord has hidden," perhaps indicating that Manasseh had not succeeded in wiping out all the Lord's prophets. While Nahum prophesied against the Assyrians, the Israelites' enemies, Zephaniah warned the Judeans that they needed to be concerned about their own evil and impending judgment.
- ii. Chapter 1: As we have discovered, it was not unusual for the prophets to speak of a near-term event and a distant one as though they were one and the same. In chapter 1, Zephaniah does this, referring first to the Day of the Lord's universal judgment on all the earth and then of His judgment against Judah, as if referring to the same event. As we learned, valleys of time often separated the events the prophets foretold. In his first chapter, Zephaniah prophesied against the royal line of Judah (even though he may have been among them [1:8]). He also prophesied against the violent and the complacent.
- iii. Chapter 2: In his second chapter, Zephaniah exhorted the people to come together and seek the Lord, urging them toward righteousness and humility. Those who did would perhaps be sheltered on the day of the Lord's anger. This message supported Josiah's attempts at reform. Then, Zephaniah turned his eyes to Judah's neighbors and prophesied the ruin of Philistia (which was uprooted by Pharaoh Neco), Moab and Ammon (whose land today is largely barren), Cush (whom the Assyrians defeated), and finally Assyria (which was ruined by the Medes and Babylonians). He prophesied that Nineveh would be reduced to desolation (2:13-15). This prophecy was absolutely accurate since the devastation of Nineveh was so complete that for hundreds of years the very location of the city was forgotten. In the 2nd century A.D., one Greek writer commented, "It is no longer possible to say where it stood. Not a single trace of it remains."^{vi}
- iv. Chapter 3: At the end of his book, Zephaniah speaks of the remnant of God's people and foretells their restoration. "On that day, I will remove your arrogant boasters... but I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord... and no one will make them afraid... I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame... I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes" (3:11-20).

Summary Statement: Nineveh was a proud and idolatrous, but so was Judah. As it turned out, only 26 years after the Lord’s judgment fell on Nineveh, Judah also fell under His judgment. The twin sins of pride and idolatry that characterized pagan peoples also became the downfall of God’s people.

Idols are images that represent a deity or a deceased person whom a worshipper believes to hold power or influence. The Scriptures tell us that Sennacherib was worshipping in Nisroch’s Temple when he was murdered (2 Kings 19:37, Isaiah 37:38). Various ideas have been proposed about the origins of the god Nisroch. According to Hebrew tradition (in the Midrash), “Nisroch” is an adaptation of Hebrew word “neser,” the name given to a plank of wood discovered by Sennacherib on his return to Assyria from his campaign in Judah. According to these traditions, this plank was originally part of Noah's Ark, and Sennacherib worshiped it as an idol.^{vii}

The people of Judah were no less guilty of idolatry. King Ahaz replicated an altar he saw in Damascus, undoubtedly in an attempt to gain the favor of a god he believed to be powerful. In his day and also in the days of Manasseh, the people of Judah worshipped Molech, the Ammonite god (known as Chemosh to the Moabites) to whom they sacrificed their children. Solomon had first erected a high place for Molech on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11:7). Although godly kings like Hezekiah and Josiah instituted major reforms and tried to rid the land of idolatry, they couldn’t drive idolatry from the people’s hearts. Instead of putting their trust in God alone, they thought they were safer spreading it out among many things (many gods) they hoped would give them security. I wonder, is that what we also do? Is trusting the Lord enough, or do we spread around our confidence, placing a bit in this and a bit in that?

Principle: *Idolatry is putting our trust in anything or anyone other than God.*

Application: Even God’s blessing can become idols in our lives if we put our trust in them. Our careers, Christian teachers and mentors, our money, and even our church can become idols. In what have you put your confidence? God alone is worthy of our trust.

Conclusion

Pride and idolatry are twin sins that we must take seriously or they can become our downfall, just as they were for Assyria, for Israel, and eventually also for Judah. God will not tolerate them in His own people any more than He will in pagans. In our next two lessons, we will read Judah’s judgment and exile, the climax of the Old Testament drama.

ⁱ Gordon Allport, quoted in Solomon Schimmel (1997), *The Seven Deadly Sins* (p. 28). Oxford: Oxford University Press, quoted at http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Pride_and_Humility_Page6

ⁱⁱ Long, J. C. (2002). *1 & 2 Kings* (pp. 497–498). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub.

ⁱⁱⁱ Negev, A. (1990). In *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (3rd ed.). New York: Prentice Hall Press.

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- iv Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (p. 1554). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- v Negev, A. (1990). In *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (3rd ed.). New York: Prentice Hall Press.
- vi Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (p. 1555). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- vii <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nisroch>