

Bible - General Questions

What Was the Great Sin of Judah and Israel?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Part 3 of a series

Often we say that their great sin was idolatry. But that sin was an effect, not the root cause.

The Wickedness of Manasseh

In [part two](#) of this series, we briefly examined the causes and consequences of Judah's backsliding during the time of Jeremiah and his prophetic predecessors. In this installment we'll examine the sin of the nation, and its root cause, in more detail. What was the great sin of Israel and Judah? Was it idolatry? Or was it something more basic and long-standing?

In order to begin to answer this question, we need to look back to the king who reigned at the time Jeremiah was born. His name was Manasseh, and he was exceedingly wicked. We find the record of Manasseh's reign in 2nd Kings chapter 21:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah. And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel.

For he rebuilt the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; he raised up altars for Baal, and made a wooden image, as Ahab king of Israel had done; and he worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He also built altars in the house of the Lord [the Temple], of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem I will put My

name." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

Also he made his son pass through the fire, practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft, and consulted spiritists and mediums. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger.

He even set a carved image of Asherah that he had made, in the house of which the Lord had said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put My name forever; and I will not make the feet of Israel wander anymore from the land which I gave their fathers – only if they are careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that My servant Moses commanded them."

But they paid no attention, and Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel.

And the Lord spoke by His servants the prophets, saying, "Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations (he has acted more wickedly than all the Amorites who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols), therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Behold, I am bringing such calamity upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. So I will forsake the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become victims of plunder to all their enemies, because they have done evil in My sight, and have provoked Me to anger since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day.' "

Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides his sin by which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the Lord.

A Brief Revival, Then the Final Plunge

Jeremiah was born during the reign of Manasseh. When Jeremiah was commissioned by God as the next of the prophets, he picked up the cry of the prophets that preceded him against the wickedness of Judah, because conditions had not really changed. In fact, we read elsewhere that after a brief revival under Josiah, the final downfall of Judah began when Jeremiah was in the middle years of his ministry. All of the kings of Judah after Josiah, the kings that reigned during Jeremiah's lifetime, backslid. They led the nation in doing all the evil things that Manasseh and the others had done.

Israel's 800-Year-Old Sin

How did this happen? How did Israel and Judah come to be in such a state of entrenched, unrelenting idolatry and immorality? In order to understand how things came to be in such a state in the time of Jeremiah, we need to go all the way back to the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 17, beginning at verse 14. Keep in mind that God spoke these words to Israel through Moses, nearly 800 years before Jeremiah's time. God said this:

"When you come to the land which the Lord your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me'...Also it shall be, when he [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he

may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel."

God commanded that every king of Israel and Judah should write down, for himself, his own copy of the Scriptures. The kings of Israel and Judah were to be men of the Book. They were to be totally immersed in the Word of God. It was to be their rule of life, and way of life. But after David's time, very few of them did this.

God not only commanded that each king should write down his own copy of the Scriptures. God also commanded that the entire Law should be read to the entire nation, every seven years, during the Feast of Tabernacles. We find this in Deuteronomy chapter 31, beginning at verse 9:

So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, saying: "At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully observe all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess."

These words were also written 800 years before Jeremiah's time. But for hundreds of years before Jeremiah came on the scene, the leaders of Israel and Judah had largely departed from the Word of God. The kings made no copy of it. The priests neglected it. The Scriptures were not taught to the people. The written Word of God was thoroughly neglected.

As a result, the people, and the kings, and even the priests went after other gods and entered into the grossest kinds of immorality. At about the time Jeremiah was born, things had gotten so bad that King Manasseh of Judah had actually set up a carved image of the pagan goddess Asherah in the Temple of the Lord. The worship of Asherah involved the worst kind of immorality imaginable. This was taking place in the courts of the temple of the living God in Jerusalem.

But this was not anything new. Israel had been doing this for hundreds of years. We read in the book of Judges chapter two that the very first generation that lived in the promised land, the first generation after the death of Joshua, had forsaken the Lord and began worshipping the pagan gods of the surrounding nations, including the goddess Asherah. There were periodic times of repentance and revival over the following centuries, but Israel and Judah always went back into pagan idolatry. And under Manasseh, things had gotten incredibly bad.

No Wonder Jeremiah Was the Weeping Prophet

Into such a scene of utter moral and spiritual desolation came Jeremiah. No wonder he was the weeping prophet.

About four years after Jeremiah began his ministry, during the reign of the last godly king, Josiah, the only copy of the Scriptures was found — neglected, cast aside, gathering dust, in the temple of the Lord that had been given over to pagan worship. After the Law of the Lord was recovered and read, there were a few years of repentance and revival under King Josiah during Jeremiah's time. The record of those years is found in 2 Kings chapters 22 and 23. But even during the later years of Josiah, the kingdom of Judah began to go into a final downhill slide that gained ever greater momentum. But Jeremiah kept on prophesying to the very end, even though the people did not receive or heed his message.

And so God's long-pent-up wrath broke out. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, thousands were killed, and the people who were left alive, all but a few, were taken into captivity in Babylon. All because of the precedent that was set hundreds of years previously in neglecting the Word and works of God, and failing to communicate them faithfully from generation to generation.

Often we say that the great sin of Judah and Israel was idolatry. But that sin was an effect, not the root cause. Judah and Israel's great, long-standing, and most basic sin was neglect of the Word of God. Truly, among them the Old Testament became for the most part "The Greatest Story Never Read."

Next: What can we learn from Jeremiah for our time?

tq0302

Related Articles · More Articles

Can the poetical books really be considered doctrinal?

Yes, absolutely - and here's why.

What happened the Monday after Palm Sunday?

Jesus came back to the Temple on Monday morning, and performed one of His most significant works.

How Should I Mark My Bible?

We're often asked, "Should I mark my Bible? Can you recommend a system?" Here's some practical advice.

Copyright © 1998-2011

TeachingtheWord Ministries • www.teachingtheword.org

All rights reserved. This article may be reproduced in its entirety only, for non-commercial purposes, provided that this copyright notice is included.

Copyright 1998-2011 TeachingTheWord Ministries