

2 Kings Series - "Divided Worship" 2 Kings 17:33-41

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Two Sides / No Side*

1. At the outbreak of the Civil War, a Tennessee cotton-planter could not decide which cause to support, the N or S
2. He had friends on both sides so he decided to stay neutral
3. He wore a gray jacket and blue trousers; dressing for both the Confederacy and the Union
4. One day this man was caught in the middle of a skirmish between the two armies
5. He stood up and shouted that he was neutral in the fight and wanted to be allowed to leave the field before the battle closed in on him
6. But Union sharpshooters, seeing the gray jacket, riddled it with bullets
7. And the Confederate marksmen, seeing the blue pants, filled them with lead
8. The point is this: When there is a war, you can't be neutral—you have to pick which side you'll be on

B. *There Is A War*

1. Well, there is a war going on
2. It's a spiritual battle being waged in the spiritual realm
3. And though it is a contest of a spiritual nature, it spills over into our world
4. Whose side are you on?

II. TEXT

A. *Set The Scene*

1. Before we begin, need to set the scene
2. This is an historically rich period of time for the Middle East, and for Israel in particular
3. Ch. 17 tells us of God's final judgment of the northern 10 tribes of Israel
 - a. after many generations of rebellion against Him and His covenant,
 - b. He finally let them be defeated by the mighty Assyrian Empire
4. History tells us that the Assyrians were brutal to those they conquered
5. They tolerated no resistance to their rule
6. If a people they had conquered gave them grief, they treated them harshly
7. Such was the case with Israel, and finally, after a few decades of revolt, Assyria applied their final solution: They deported the entire population of Israel to other areas of their empire
8. This transplanting of the populations of whole nations was a state policy in Assyria
9. And in vs. 24-28, we read how the King of Assyria shuffled other

- conquered people around, moving some in to the newly vacated lands and cities of Israel
10. But a problem quickly arose; while the Israelites may have rejected God, and so lost their homes and lands, God never abandoned the Land itself; It was still the place of promise
 11. So when these new people moved in, who did not know or care about God, He sent them a rather clear message that this was still His land
 - a. the message came in the form of a plague of lions who attacked them
 12. People of the ancient world believed in many gods who exercised control over limited regions
 13. When they saw this plague of lions suddenly break out on them, they rightly concluded it was the judgment of the God of the Israelites and of this area
 14. But they knew nothing about this God or how to placate Him
 15. So they sent a message to the King of Assyria and asked for one of the deported priests of the Jews to come and teach them about this God
 16. Their request was granted, and a priest returned to Bethel, the center of Israelite worship, and taught the people, as it says in v. 28, "how they should fear the Lord"
 17. But how pure and right could this priest's teaching have been?
 - a. after all, as a priest of the north, he wasn't of the priestly line of Levi
 - b. furthermore, the Israelites had never worshipped God rightly from the very day of the birth of their nation
 - c. when Israel broke away from Judah under Jeroboam's rebellion, he had set up golden calves as representatives of God for the people to worship
 - d. from start to finish, the worship of God in Israel was merely a dead form without substance or reality because it denied the very way God had Himself prescribed for entering in to His presence
 18. What this priest passed on to these new people was an empty religious form that possessed nothing of the real faith but the shell of a name = Yahweh!
 19. This priest didn't teach them anything about God Himself, but only *how* to fear Him; meaning, some basic religious rituals that acknowledged His presence and power
 20. As a result, the people never turned from their allegiance and devotion to their old idols
 21. That's why we read in v. 33 . . .

B. Vs. 33

{33} They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods; according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away.

1. This seems a strange statement for the biblical writer to make
2. How could they "fear the Lord" and still practice their old cultic rituals?
3. That is the point he is trying to make—this period was marked by complete religious confusion
4. They feared the Lord, but they continued to practice their old religions and worship their old deities
5. They recognized the power of the true God, but they still lived by and for

the old ways

6. To understand what is going on here we need to look at v. 25

And it was so, at the beginning of their dwelling there, *that they did not fear the LORD; therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which killed some of them.*

7. When they first arrived, they didn't even know who Yahweh was, let alone respect Him
 8. So God revealed His power and presence to them via the lions
 9. As Charles Spurgeon said; the lions were their evangelists, and their teeth were cutting arguments
 10. The people were taught to fear this God and were given rituals to appease Him
 11. But their knowledge of Him never moved past this deficient stage of fearful terror
 12. The people would never have thought about God if it had not been for the lions
 13. When they did think of him it was merely to tremble before Him
 14. Their notion of God was that of a jealous, capricious tyrant, whose ways were unknown to them—
 15. In whose territory they now found themselves against their will
 16. And who merely need to be pacified before the plague grew worse
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17. How many a modern person is marked by this same idea of God?
 18. How many think of God only when they are ill and then forget about Him when they are well
 19. How many pour out a prayer when they are in trouble, and forget all about Him when they prosper?
 20. How many only see God when calamity falls but do not even consider Him when joy rains
 21. How many are like storm tossed sailors who burn candles and shriek out to the Madonna in the tempest, but as soon as they reach the harbor safe, stop not at the church to offer thanks, but the bar to hoist a schooner of beer?
 22. You know, fear has driven many a man and woman to God
 23. The problem is that fear cannot *keep* them there
 24. Fear must lead to something more noble, or it fails in its purpose
 25. Fear was never meant to be permanent; it is only the alarm bell which rings to wake the soul that sleeps on when in peril
 26. Fear should pass on to repentance, faith, and joy in Jesus
 27. Fear may drive us to Christ, but only love will keep us there
 28. These people were never taught about God—only forms to appease Him
 29. And as a result, their fear never became anything other than a craven terror

C. Vs. 34-41

{34} To this day they continue practicing the former rituals; they do not fear the LORD, nor do they follow their statutes or their ordinances, or the law and commandment which the LORD had commanded the children of Jacob, whom He named Israel,

{35} with whom the LORD had made a covenant and charged them, saying: "You shall not fear other gods, nor bow down to them nor serve them nor sacrifice to them;

{36} "but the LORD, who brought you up from the land of Egypt with great power and

an outstretched arm, Him you shall fear, Him you shall worship, and to Him you shall offer sacrifice.

{37} "And the statutes, the ordinances, the law, and the commandment which He wrote for you, you shall be careful to observe forever; you shall not fear other gods.

{38} "And the covenant that I have made with you, you shall not forget, nor shall you fear other gods.

{39} "But the LORD your God you shall fear; and He will deliver you from the hand of all your enemies."

{40} However they did not obey, but they followed their former rituals.

{41} So these nations feared the LORD, yet served their carved images; also their children and their children's children have continued doing as their fathers did, even to this day.

1. In v. 33 and 41, the writer says they feared the Lord, but served the old gods
2. Yet in v. 34 he says they did *not* fear the Lord
3. Which is it? Did they fear the Lord or not?
4. The two statements are set side by side because they refer to two different kinds of fear
5. We've already examined the first kind of fear, terror; that's the kind meant in vs. 33 & 41
6. But v. 34 speaks of *true* reverence and respect for God as God
7. It gives the insight we need to understand what was really going on with these people

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8. Outwardly, they feared Yahweh
 - a. they spoke His name
 - b. they practiced the rituals of worship toward Him the priest had taught them
 9. But there was no loyalty to Him; no real devotion of their hearts to Him
 10. If there had been, then they would have put away their idols
 - a. they would have repented of the old ways—
 - b. and embraced the ways of God as described in vs. 34-39
 11. But no, they continued to *serve* their idols
 12. Don't miss the picture the writer draws: They feared God, but served their idols
 13. And the writer passes this judgment on them; Though they took the name of Yahweh and the form of His worship, they didn't *really* fear the Lord
 - a. they didn't really worship Him
 - b. they didn't really have any kind of a covenant relationship with Him

III. CONCLUSION

A. Getting Real

1. What we see here is highly instructive
2. This isn't merely an interesting historical sidelight
3. God intends it to be an abiding lesson and warning
4. In 1 Cor. 10, the Apostle Paul says that the history of Israel is a lesson to us

- who live at the end of the age
5. The names and places have changed—but the story is the same
 6. The God of Israel is the God of this time and this place
 - a. He is not tied to some hill in Samaria or some man-made shrine in Jerusalem
 - b. the earth is His and all its fullness
 7. And we must heed the warning of these verses:
 8. That it is possible to have a *form of religion* with no real content
 9. That we can mouth the name of "Jesus"—but have no covenant relationship with God

B. What Jesus Said About Following Him

1. One day, as Jesus was speaking to the disciples about what it meant to follow Him He said something that put swift brakes on them
2. He said, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." (Luke 9:23)
3. Think of what those words meant to a first century Jew
 - a. the cross was an instrument of unspeakable shame and pain
 - b. it was a Roman form of execution used only for the most despised and abhorred
 - c. it was the height of humility and shame to die on a cross
4. But Jesus commands it of those who would come after Him—
 - a. not that they would commit crimes worthy of execution by the Romans
 - b. but that they would die to self with all it's urges to exalt itself and seek its own
 - c. that they would put to death all that was in them which sought to serve anything other than God alone
5. What more fitting comment is there on this passage in 2 Kings than these words of Jesus?
6. I for one know what it means to face the daily struggle with the inner urge to go my own way
 - a. to set God to one side
 - b. to maintain a facade of religion and faith
 - c. but to in my own way, seek my own way
7. I must confess to you that there are times when I come to church and stand and sing, or sit and pray, but my faith is cold and the reverence and respect that is due God is little more than gray ash
8. How thankful I am at those times that the Holy Spirit breathes on me and rekindles the near dead embers of love, and stokes them into a passionate fire of devotion and worship and service
9. There is reason why Jesus told them they were to take up the cross daily—
 - a. because the battle with self is daily
 - b. and if we fail to renew our commitment to Him, daily, then we will find ourselves slipping into a dead, dry, religious form

C. Where Are You?

1. I want to end today with a special appeal to those here who fit the profile of those transplanted foreigners in Israel
2. I want to speak to those of you who are either young people who have grown up with Christian parents, or you are married to a Christian spouse
3. Like those transplanted foreigners, you find yourself at church because of your parents or mate
4. Like them, you wouldn't be here if they weren't
5. You come because you are asked—and it's good that you do!
6. But you have come long enough, that going to church has become a *routine* for you, a *form* you give little thought to
7. Outwardly, to all appearances, you "fear the Lord"
8. But if appearances were set aside, life would tell a very different story
9. It's not that you are a bad person
 - a. in all likelihood, you're a good person
 - b. a fine, moral, and likeable guy or gal
10. But that's not the issue; being likeable does not qualify you for heaven
11. Being nice does not satisfy the Lord
12. Only being genuinely converted meets the standard of His acceptance
13. Only by entering in to the covenant of salvation can you be saved