



God Judges

God holds all people accountable for their sin.

2 KINGS 17:7-20

On October 21, 1868, a severe earthquake hit Hayward, California. Ten days later, J.D. Cooper, a San Francisco physician, wrote a newspaper editorial calling for an earthquake early warning system. He suggested putting an “earthquake bell” on a tower in the center of the city. Detectors could be placed in increments of 10-100 miles, radiating from the city. If shocks occurred, warnings would be sent across telegraph wires. Through the years, various detection systems have been developed. The intent is for the warnings to save lives.

What kinds of warning systems are common today—in our homes, cars, community, or nation? Why do people ignore warnings?



UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

2 KINGS 17:1-41

Assyria dates back to Genesis (see Gen. 10:10-12). It was located in northern Mesopotamia. Its first capital, Asshur, was founded about 2000 BC beside the Tigris River, in what is now northern Iraq. Assyria's strength wavered through the centuries. Within twenty years of Israel's united monarchy dividing into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (930 BC), a new leader arose in Assyria, Adad-nirari II. He began to transition Assyria into a dominant power. Tiglath-pileser III, also called "Pul," expanded Assyria further and grew it from a nation to an empire. He annexed lands and conquered peoples throughout the Fertile Crescent. Under his rule, Assyria stretched from Tyre and Sidon to ancient Ur. Assyrian soldiers were especially brutal; they killed captives by beheading, impaling, or skinning them alive. This cruelty was part of the evil referred to in Jonah 1:2.

Israel's King Menahem avoided being conquered by paying a bribe (called "tribute") to Tiglath-pileser (2 Kings 15:19-20). Yet Assyrian forces eventually conquered cities in northern Israel (15:29). Tiglath-pileser's successor, Shalmaneser V, wanted to expand Assyria further. He eventually put Israel's capital city of Samaria in his crosshairs.

Read 2 Kings 17:7-20 in your Bible. What sin was the constant struggle in Israel? Why do you think this particular sin was such a lure for the people?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

WARNED (2 KINGS 17:7-13)

⁷ This disaster happened because the people of Israel sinned against the LORD their God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt and because they worshiped other gods. ⁸ They lived according to the customs

of the nations that the LORD had dispossessed before the Israelites and according to what the kings of Israel did.⁹ The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD their God that were not right. They built high places in all their towns from watchtower to fortified city.¹⁰ They set up for themselves sacred pillars and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every green tree.

¹¹ They burned incense there on all the high places just like the nations that the LORD had driven out before them had done. They did evil things, angering the LORD.¹² They served idols, although the LORD had told them, “You must not do this.”¹³ Still, the LORD warned Israel and Judah through every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commands and statutes according to the whole law I commanded your ancestors and sent to you through my servants the prophets.”

VERSES 7-8

The *disaster* mentioned in verse 7 unfolded over a period of years. When Tiglath-pileser of Assyria conquered areas and people, he led mass deportations of those he defeated. Like moving chess pieces on a board, he shifted deported people into lands vacated by others whom he had also relocated. Lack of familiarity and feelings of insecurity led to a loss of nationalistic pride and fervor, which were conditions Tiglath-pileser exploited.

To avoid being conquered by the Assyrians, some peoples made tribute payments to its kings. Israel did this for some years. At some point, though, Israel's King Hoshea ceased making payments to Assyria's King Shalmaneser. The Assyrians responded fiercely by attacking Israel, taking Hoshea prisoner, and laying siege to the capital city of Samaria. The siege lasted three years, until 722 BC, when Samaria fell to the Assyrians. That same year, Shalmaneser died. His brother and successor, Sargon II, deported the Israelites to Assyria, resettling some of the captives to Halah, which was just northeast of Nineveh, and others farther east across the Zagros Mountains in the territory of the Medes, in what is now western Iran.

So the Israelites and their king had been conquered and deported. Samaria had fallen to the Assyrians. Ancient Israel was no more. People from the faraway regions of ancient Babylonia had been relocated to Israel, into the cities vacated by the captives.

This was the disaster that had happened. God wanted His people to understand why these disasters had occurred. After all, they had been warned.

These verses outline why the Israelites had suffered such a catastrophe: they *sinned against the LORD, worshiped other gods*, and followed the religious *customs* of their pagan neighbors. This was in direct violation of what the Lord had commanded centuries earlier when He established His covenantal relationship with His people at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:2-3). God pointed back to that covenant relationship by reminding the Israelites that He was the one who had *brought them out of the land of Egypt*. The disaster came because the Israelites had violated the foundational commandment of having no other gods besides Him.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.
(See Leviticus 22:2; Matthew 22:37-38.)

VERSES 9-12

Before the Hebrews entered the promised land, the Lord issued a warning through Moses. He said that if His people were to make an idol in any form, He would cause His people to be scattered “among the peoples,” and driven to other nations (see Deut. 4:23-27). The Israelites did what the Lord had specifically forbidden. Verses 9-12 outline the particular offenses the Israelites committed as they worshiped other gods.

They built *high places*, sacred shrines for worship, a practice of the pagan Canaanites. They erected *sacred pillars*, like the one honoring Baal in 2 Kings 3:2, and *Asherah poles*, which were wooden cult symbols that honored the fertility goddess Asherah—considered to be the mother of Baal. Mirroring a practice associated with idolatry, they *burned incense* at these cultic sites. Worshipers believed the incense both bolstered their prayers and made them pleasing to the gods. Finally, they *served* these *idols*. Such actions were contrary to worshiping and being loyal to God and defiled people religiously.

Astonishingly, the text says God’s people did these things *secretly* against the Lord. The term *secretly* can imply

hypocritically—meaning the Israelites were involved in these detestable practices while still claiming to be God’s people.

VERSE 13

Assyrian captivity should have come as no surprise. The Lord had warned both *Israel* and *Judah* for over 200 years. He had consistently alerted them through the voice of *every prophet and every seer*. These were not the only warnings. God had indicated through King Solomon that disobedience would result in the people being deported (1 Kings 8:46) and had issued the same word to Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 14:9-15).

In addition to hearing verbal warnings, seeing the example of the nations the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites should have alerted God’s people (2 Kings 17:8). If God would remove them from the land, He would do the same to the Israelites for committing the same offenses. God had sent His people every imaginable warning—both verbally and visually.

Twice the text mentions that the Lord had driven out the peoples who had lived in this land before (vv. 8,11). Why might the children of Israel think they would be treated differently and wouldn’t be run out of the land?

REJECTED (2 KINGS 17:14-17)

¹⁴ But they would not listen. Instead they became obstinate like their ancestors who did not believe the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They rejected his statutes and his covenant he had made with their ancestors and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves, following the surrounding nations the LORD had commanded them not to imitate. ¹⁶ They abandoned all the commands of the LORD their God. They made cast images for themselves, two calves, and an Asherah pole. They bowed in worship to all the stars in the sky and served Baal. ¹⁷ They sacrificed their sons and daughters in the fire and practiced divination and interpreted omens. They devoted themselves to do what was evil in the LORD’s sight and angered him.

VERSES 14-15

In spite of God's persistent warning, His people *would not listen*; they were *obstinate*. Some translations render this word as the people having stiffened or hardened their necks. The imagery is of turning so the back of one's head is facing the person who is being rejected.

Like their *ancestors*, they *did not believe the LORD*. This means they thought of God as being unreliable and even unworthy of their trust. How remarkable, especially when one thinks of how powerfully God had revealed Himself in ancient Israel, most recently through the ministries of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

They *rejected* God's *statutes, covenant, and warnings*. They had turned their backs on God's laws and the boundaries that establish good, right, and moral behavior for His people. They had broken His covenant by not living up to the expectation of loving and being loyal to God alone. Having rejected God's laws and their covenantal relationship with Him, God's people closed their ears to the prophetic warnings the Lord had consistently sent.

Nothing can fill the spiritual void in us apart from God Himself.

Additionally, God's people *followed worthless idols and became worthless*. The Hebrew word translated *worthless* carries the idea of being empty and unsatisfactory. People in the ancient Near East would make hollow idols by pouring molten metals into a mold. By following the hollow idols, God's people had become hollow themselves. They became like the worthless idols they worshiped. This imagery is a reminder that nothing can fill the spiritual void in us apart from God Himself. How tragic when people turn their backs on God and try to replace Him with something meaningless and empty.

VERSES 16-17

These verses reveal a tragic downward spiral of disobedience and outline what happened to the Israelites. They first *abandoned all* of God's *commands*. The shocking word here is *all*. We want to think there is a line that people won't cross, but history and today's news show this is not true.

The Israelites not only worshiped idols made with human hands, they also became involved in celestial worship, bowing to

the *stars*. This was a direct violation to what God had commanded. (See Deut. 4:19.)

Copying what the worshipers of the Canaanite god Molech practiced, Israelite parents *sacrificed their sons and daughters* as burnt offerings. This detestable tradition was not unknown in the Old Testament era. Leviticus 18:21 says, “You are not to sacrifice any of your children in the fire to Molech.” The Molech worship rites also included *divination* and *omens* or sorcery.

Almost as a summary, verse 17 closes by saying the people *devoted themselves to do what was evil*. The word *devoted* comes from a Hebrew word that means to sell oneself. Just as Esau had sold his birthright for a bowl of stew, the Israelites sold themselves in exchange for immediate and temporary satisfaction.

What parallels do you see in the practices of ancient Israel and what people do today? Which of today’s culturally acceptable actions do you think are actually evil in the Lord’s sight?

REMOVED (2 KINGS 17:18-20)

¹⁸ Therefore, the LORD was very angry with Israel, and he removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah remained.

¹⁹ Even Judah did not keep the commands of the LORD their God but lived according to the customs Israel had practiced. ²⁰ So the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, punished them, and handed them over to plunderers until he had banished them from his presence.

VERSES 18-20

Having become *very angry with Israel*, God responded. He *removed* His people *from his presence*, a phrase repeated in verse 23. This statement means He *punished* His people by deporting them from the promised land and relocating them to Assyria.

After Israel had been removed from their homeland, only *Judah remained*. What happened to Israel should have been a cautionary tale for Judah. They, though, followed in Israel’s footsteps and embraced the *customs Israel had practiced*.

Verse 20 tragically concludes by stating the Lord had *banished* all of the descendants of Israel *from his presence*. By the time 2 Kings 17 was written, both Israel and Judah had been conquered and their residents had been forcefully taken into captivity.

The contrast could not have been greater. First Kings opened with David, the apple of God's eye. (See Ps. 17:8.) Second Kings 17 closes with both Israel and Judah being cast out of God's sight. The picture is one of judgment. It's a reminder that those who reject God do face His judgment and are ultimately separated from Him.

**How do we reconcile the fact that God's faithful love (or mercy) endures forever with His being a God who judges His people?
How is His punishment an expression of His faithful love?**

BIBLE SKILL: *Examine cross references to gain deeper insight.*

Use a cross reference Bible to identify at least three biblical commands mentioned in 2 Kings 17:7-20 that God's people ignored or rejected. Consider why the people might have strayed from God's commands and think of reasons God might have given these particular commands. What are the benefits that come through obeying God or the damage that comes from ignoring Him?

APPLY THE TEXT

- God calls people to repent and turn to Him.
- Rejecting God leads to greater folly and evil.
- Judgment awaits all who reject God.

The ancient Israelites had adopted the religious practices of their neighbors while still claiming to be God’s people. What non-biblical beliefs and practices are Christians tempted to incorporate into their lives today? Why is this a lure? Be ready to discuss your thoughts with your Bible study group.

What hollow replacements are people tempted to substitute for a genuine and personal relationship with the living God? Which substitutes are possible attractions for you? How can you make sure you do not embrace these hollow substitutes?

Use the lessons from these verses to examine your own life. Are there sins that have created a barrier between you and God? What changes do you need to make in your personal and spiritual life?

PRAYER NEEDS
