

Why Nations Fall

4th Weekend of Kingdomtide – July 1/2, 2006

Sermon Background Study

2 Kings 24:1-7 (NRSV)

In his days King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came up; Jehoiakim became his servant for three years; then he turned and rebelled against him. ²The LORD sent against him bands of the Chaldeans, bands of the Arameans, bands of the Moabites, and bands of the Ammonites; he sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by his servants the prophets. ³Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the LORD, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, ⁴and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to pardon. ⁵Now the rest of the deeds of Jehoiakim, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah? ⁶So Jehoiakim slept with his ancestors; then his son Jehoiachin succeeded him. ⁷The king of Egypt did not come again out of his land, for the king of Babylon had taken over all that belonged to the king of Egypt from the Wadi of Egypt to the River Euphrates.

2 Chronicles 7:12-14 (NRSV)

¹²Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. ¹³When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, ¹⁴if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Today we celebrate the birth of our nation and its commitment to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, the history of humankind is marked by the rise and the fall of nations.

My family and I recently returned from a trip to Europe. We saw evidence of countless nations and empires that were once great but now are only ruins. We stood in ancient Carthage, founded by a Phoenician queen 800 years before Jesus. Carthage was burned by the Romans and covered with salt so nothing could grow there. We stood in the great Roman Colosseum finished in 82AD. It would still be one of the largest arenas in the world but after Rome's collapse, the iron in the columns was yanked out and the marble facing was removed, all in an ancient recycling project.

A Confession

We are now midway through our *Thru the Bible* reading plan and I have a confession to make. I've fallen behind. As I write this, I should be wrapping up 2 Kings and I'm still in 2 Samuel! I guess that puts me about four centuries behind.

Now, I'm pretty sure that I'm not alone in this. (Robert confessed to me today that he is behind too). I'd guess that many of us who started this project with the intention of keeping up each day have, from time to time, found ourselves behind. Maybe not four centuries behind, but still behind. If you are like me, you've found that once you fall behind it is easy to fall further and further behind until you feel overwhelmed.

I have some choices about what to do now that I'm behind. First, I could simply give up. For a lot of good reasons, I don't want to give up. I'm discovering stories and people that I never paid much attention to before. Many of the *Renovare* notes and book introductions have given me a lot of very helpful spiritual insights on these ancient texts. I also know that a daily(!) practice of Bible reading ought to be a part of my life. After all, this is the Word of God we're talking about!

A second choice would be to simply start up with the Gospel of Luke, which begins with the June 26 reading. This would certainly be preferable to giving up on the *Thru the Bible* plan and it would also be better than staying perpetually three or four weeks behind. With few exceptions, the sermons and background studies will continue to be drawn from the readings for the week prior. Reading with the preachers is definitely the way to go.

My choice, however, is to set aside some larger blocks of time, an hour here and there, to read longer portions and catch up. This is what I'm doing now and I'm finding a lot of value in reading for longer periods. You get a larger perspective on some of these stories and can read the larger narratives, such as the Elijah stories, in a single sitting. I'm also doing more reading from the Message, especially in the Old Testament narratives.

If, like me, you've fallen behind, don't be discouraged. Either plunge right back in and come back to what you've missed next year or find a way to read longer portions and catch up.

Twice in the Bible (Elijah and Revelation), an angel says to take God's word and eat it. I hope that you'll continue on with this rich and rewarding meal.

Nearly a thousand years before Jesus, the nation of Israel was at its zenith of power and wealth. Yet, just four centuries later, Jerusalem lay in ruins, a burned-out hulk, the ark of the covenant lost forever. Why? Why did these nations collapse? Is it inevitable? Does such an end await our own nation?

Israel's fall

The story of ancient Israel is, in many ways, the tragic story of a people chosen by God to be the light of the world yet unable to live as God taught them to live. No sooner do they escape Egypt than they fall into bickering and complaining in the wilderness. When Moses goes up God's mountain to get the Law, the people fashion an idol of a golden calf. After entering the Promised Land, God is to be their king, but the people soon begin to live as they see fit, to do what was right in their own eyes. Despite the warnings of Samuel, the people demand a human king. Saul soon proves to be disobedient and descends into madness. David takes the throne but sins horribly. His son, Solomon, imports countless foreign gods and religions along with his thousand wives and concubines. After Israel splits in two, the northern kingdom of Israel goes from bad king to bad king, men who hunt down God's prophets, until the kingdom is swept away by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah fares only a little better.

There are a few kings who call the people back to God. But even Judah does not turn from its wicked ways. Far from healed, as God had promised Solomon was possible (today's passage from 2 Chronicles), Judah too was destroyed and the people sent into exile.

The use of liberty

The 4th of July is a celebration of liberty. The most potent symbol of this liberty is a statue that graces the New York harbor. We enjoy liberties in this country that were not even imagined for most of human history. Yet, what are we to do with this liberty? How does God desire us to use the freedom we enjoy? Are we to live as we think best, doing what seems right to us?

The story of Israel is a cautionary tale that points us away from ourselves and toward the LORD God. God's desire for us is straightforward – love God and love neighbor every day and in every way. Imagine living in a nation in which every person actually loved as the Bible teaches us to love.

But no one ever has lived in such a nation. Humans and all our institutions are marred by sin and confronted by evil. We are incapable of loving God and loving neighbor as we know we should. We cannot always reason our way to what is right, and when we can we lack the strength to put the interests of others ahead of our own. God's promise to Solomon is conditional: *if you . . . then I will . . .* But Israel did not humble itself or turn from its wicked ways. What nation has? Is all lost?

Because we are not able to love God and neighbor, all seems lost. Thus, the greatest human need is the need for salvation. Of all the games that we think matters (e.g., political and economic), it is the salvation game that matters the most. We are free to love God and neighbor, free to trust Jesus Christ with our lives, free to be the people that God hopes we will be. This is the way our freedoms – our unalienable God-given rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – ought to be used. And with God, all things are possible!

Paul's Letter to Philemon

This NT writing popped up in the reading plan a week ago or so and I want to share a few thoughts on this brief but powerfully radical letter from Paul.

The letter revolves around a slave owner and a slave. There were many slaves in the Greco-Roman world. Though many were brutally treated, many slaves were educated and owned property. Slaves often functioned in sensitive and highly responsible positions. Race played no part in the slavery system of the day and there was no consciousness of slaves being a social class or sharing a common plight. Free people sometimes sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts or even to get a special job. For example, Erastus (Romans 16:23) probably sold himself to the city of Corinth to secure the position of treasurer. However, though the system bore little resemblance to America's tragic experience of slavery, the slaves of the Greco-Roman world were still slaves.

Philemon is a friend of Paul's, a Christian, and a slave owner. Onesimus is a slave, a Christian, and a dear friend to Paul. The letter doesn't give us all the information we'd like about what is going on, but it seems that Paul is unsure how Onesimus will be received by Philemon when he returns. It is likely that Onesimus is a runaway.

Paul tells Philemon that he could simply tell Philemon to take back Onesimus, but instead, Paul asks Philemon to welcome this slave as he would welcome Paul! In other words, Paul is seeking radical love, a love that transcends anger or revenge. A love that transcends pride or financial matters.

It seems a bit odd that such a brief letter would have been accepted as part of the New Testament canon, until we see that this letter is about love in action. Philemon's welcoming of a runaway slave as he would welcome Paul would be a profoundly counter-cultural act. This simple "welcome him as you would welcome me" from Paul reminds us that living out our discipleship can be both demanding and surprising.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

July 2 – July 9

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 13-15; Ecclesiastes 2 Many parables including the mustard seed and the prodigal son</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 16-18; Ecclesiastes 3 More parables; the rich ruler; Jesus again foretells his death and resurrection</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 19-21; Ecclesiastes 4 Jesus enters Jerusalem for Passover week; Jesus cleanses the temple and is then confronted by Pharisees and the temple leadership</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 22-24; Ecclesiastes 5 Crucifixion and resurrection</p>
<p>Day 5 Amos 1-3; Ecclesiastes 6 Amos brings a message from God during a time of prosperity</p>	<p>Day 6 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 7 Amos 4-6; Ecclesiastes 6 A lament for Israel's sin; complacent self-indulgence will meet a bitter end</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got questions about the Bible?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up fast. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to gain a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewcccl.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are some reasons that nations fall? You might make a list of reasons that you were taught in school – political, economic, social, etc. What is the biblical explanation for the fall of Israel and Judah? What constituted a good king, so far as the Bible is concerned? A bad king? How might the biblical explanations of the kingdoms' fall differ from explanations that you might get in college?
2. What do you make of God's conditional promise to Solomon? How is it helpful for God to promise healing if we are incapable of humbling ourselves, praying, seeking God, and turning from wicked ways? Do you think that this promise has been fulfilled? In whom?
3. Americans often seem pre-occupied with our rights. But what is the place of our responsibilities? Make a list of key rights and responsibilities that God has given us.
4. We live in a pluralistic and diverse country. How are we to live with people who do not acknowledge that Jesus is Lord? What is the role of our faith in our lives as citizens? Ancient Israel was a theocracy. Should this be our goal for America? If not, what sort of society should we strive for? What is the place of religion in the public square? What is the place of Christianity in the public square?