

“They have forsaken the LORD” Isaiah 1:4

A nation’s “soul” is determined by its beliefs. If it is true that “as a man thinks, so he is,” it is also true that “as a nation thinks, so it is”. Its values and belief system are primary because they determine its behaviour and its character, and, therefore, its soul. It was God’s plan for the Jewish nation that it should put him at the centre of its belief system. It was to know him and believe in him, and to this end he revealed himself to the nation, gave them a Law to follow, and prophets to speak his word. Because he was in his essential being a holy God and the source of true morality, believing in him meant obeying his call to righteous behaviour. Thus the nation was to be characterized by the twin touches of faith and holiness, and these characteristics would prove to be the source of peace, joy and prosperity. It would have a truly healthy soul with righteousness at its core. This was the privileged birthright of the Jewish nation.

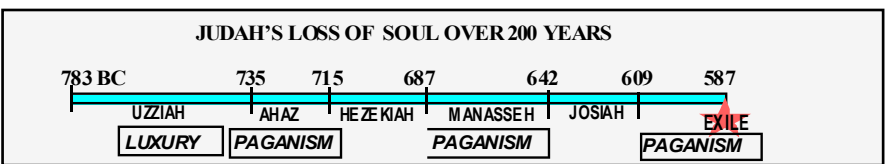
The tragedy was that, after repeated disobedience the nation finally spurned its godly birthright and heritage, and embraced instead the soul of the godless world around it. This happened at the time of the biblical prophets, when the nation had already been split into the two parts of Israel and Judah. On such unbelievable folly, God was obliged to pronounce devastating judgement. Israel, the northern part of the nation was destroyed first. Judah, the southern part, totally ignoring what happened to Israel, and wantonly persisting in rejecting its heritage, in turn suffered Israel’s fate. Judah truly lost its soul and with it everything else. The process by which this happened in Judah holds a lesson for any nation spurning a godly heritage.

**Early Struggles**

From its very inception under Moses it was a struggle for the Jewish nation to keep God central. Humanity and society find godliness difficult at any time, and the Jews were no exception. Even as Moses was receiving from God the commandments which were to be the rock of its moral life, Israel went after the Golden Calf and succumbed to permissiveness and drunkenness. This tendency to backslide was never eradicated, and when, on the death of Solomon, Judah eventually emerged as a separate nation it was always ready to pick up the “easier” and less demanding gods of its neighbours, fighting shy of a religion (even if it was their own) which made moral demands. Fortunately, for some two centuries Judah was blessed by a number of godly kings whose hearts were for the Lord and who encouraged genuine faith. They managed on the whole, despite the people, to keep godly characteristics alive. If it had not been for such kings who sought to follow the ways of the Lord, Judah would almost certainly have gone into exile a good century or more earlier than it did. By contrast, the northern tribes (Israel) had a succession of idolatrous, power-seeking rulers and they were eradicated from the map 130 years before Judah. That is the difference godly political leadership can make. Even if it is true that ungodly and immoral leaders can still make good economists or show clever political skills, the fact is that they invariably kill the soul of a nation, deeply damage its most valuable characteristics and bring disaster. The morality of a nation’s leaders is crucial for the well being of its soul. They are opinion formers, and all opinion formers have a huge responsibility in a nation: they either guard or destroy the soul.

**The Disastrous Effect of Wealth and Luxury**

Even godly kings or leaders cannot always keep a population pure: there are always forces ready to overwhelm the best of legislation and example, and it was, in fact, under a godly king, Uzziah, that the rot in Judah really began to appear in a serious way. This was due in fact to a prolonged 50 year period of extraordinary prosperity which unfortunately proved to be also a period when the gods of mammon and hedonism reared their heads high and came to rule the behaviour of the whole nation, especially its leaders. It was a period which provides a perfect example of Jesus’ own comment that “the love of money is the root of all evil”. Prosperity, pleasure and power became the nation’s goals and also became its deadly enemies, effectively undermining its moral and religious heritage. The heart beat of the nation changed for the worse: selfishness and greed, pleasure and personal indulgence, even debauchery and robbery became the dominant characteristics. The whole nation, rich and poor,



priest and people, rulers and subjects, became deeply infected during those 50 years. It is evident from Isaiah and Micah just how much this change affected the nation’s leaders; instead of being a bulwark against the new tide, they themselves were carried along with the self interest and greed, becoming even worse

than those they ruled. It is astonishing how deeply the prosperous age of Uzziah corrupted Judah’s soul. **It clearly demonstrates that there is something in human nature that finds it virtually impossible to resist the temptations that affluence brings.** Rather than bring contentment it whets the appetite for more riches. It does not satiate the desire for pleasure but, if anything, increases it; neither does it reduce robbery, violence and corruption but causes them to escalate. It heralds decadence in the moral sphere.

Dangerous prosperity was not an entirely new experience for Judah: it had been an Achilles heel for Solomon himself during his great and prosperous rule in Jerusalem some 300 years before. The oppression and injustice which had grown up then in the midst of all his riches had been a root cause of the break up of the kingdom into two parts. On a wider front secular history is full of examples of the debilitating effect that great prosperity can have on even the most powerful of nations, the Roman Empire being a notorious example. Justice, principle and honesty are rapidly neglected where money and pleasure begin to rule, though, of course, justice, principle and honesty are loudly and hypocritically trumpeted when convenient for corrupt leadership.

## The Corrupting Influence of Idolatry

A second phase in the loss of the nation's soul began after Uzziah's death, when Ahaz (preceded briefly by Jotham) took over the throne and deliberately opened wide the nation to every pagan religion and influence. He himself even indulged in child sacrifice with his own son. This flood of paganism effectively nullified any attempt to bring the nation back to any moral discipline: it cemented the damage already inflicted by the prosperity. In fact the prosperity and trade under Uzziah had made it all too easy (and economically even necessary) to become accustomed to the idolatry of other nations, and imitate its corrupt and barbaric ways. Thus it opened the way and encouraged the idolatrous policy of Ahaz. Where money and profits were demanded the old moral religion was pushed into second place. **It was much more convenient to have religions which offered no moral restraints or asked no awkward moral questions**, but rather had a focus on personal comfort and could even be perceived as a boost to economic success, as for example in case of the Baal fertility rites. Idolatrous religion was no real barrier to the hedonistic life style, but was easily accommodated.

Ahaz was further pushed in the direction of paganism by the fact that shortly after Uzziah's death the Assyrians had become a dire threat to the nation's existence (as Isaiah and Micah had warned). Ahaz was forced to swear allegiance to Assyria, and thereby inevitably had to allow altars to her gods in the Temple at Jerusalem. Thus paganism became politically necessary. It was the political correctness of its day. In this way pagan barbarism was rapidly and widely adopted by a population already pre-disposed in their prosperity to worship many gods, and now openly encouraged to do so by the highest authority in the land. For twenty years under Ahaz, Judah went downhill rapidly. A whole generation grew up to know little other than religious confusion: there was no "one God", a true God whose moral absolutes were at the core of belief, but a plethora of gods, most of whom were there to make sure life simply ran smoothly and pleasurably, and who were to be coaxed into helpful action by sacrifice. All had to be found a place, but each could be ignored when convenient for the business of wealth and pleasure. If affluence had whittled away the moral restraints of Judah's God, paganism blurred them completely in a fashionable syncretistic religious system that reduced Judah's God to something existing only in ritual.

**"Paganism was the political correctness of the day"**

It is conceivable that Judah might have recovered from this downward trend if a succession of godly kings had followed Ahaz, and if they had had time to bring things back on course. However, this was not to be. Though Hezekiah, who followed him, was indeed a godly king and reigned for almost thirty years (and supported throughout by Isaiah), his successor Manasseh once again opened the door to paganism and practised it more than Ahaz. Moreover he did so for over 50 yrs.

It was this long period of 50 yrs under Manasseh that did irreparable damage to Judah. It meant that a generation which, even under Hezekiah, had not really thrown off the paganism of his predecessor, Ahaz, passed on its idolatrous beliefs and behaviour to two succeeding generations. It meant that children grew up who not only saw nothing wrong in the paganism of their parents but, even worse, simply passed it on to an even more ignorant generation. The whole culture radically changed. Paganism became ingrained and embedded. If these two or three succeeding generations heard anything about true "Yahweh religion" it was completely emptied of any real content: they did not know what it really stood for. No prophet, unless it was Isaiah very early on, was allowed to alert the nation. Tradition has it that Isaiah was in fact killed by Manasseh. It was, then, during these two generations of Manasseh's rule that Judah really lost its soul, and it was on what happened during Manasseh's reign that God finally pronounced the word of destruction on Judah. It was only when Manasseh died that the Lord's prophets were able to confront the nation with its sin, but then it was too late.

### Summary & Comment

Judah's "loss of soul" with its appalling consequences took nearly two centuries to be fully worked out. It was the result of an increasing turning of its back on God over a number of generations, and did not happen overnight. In any assessment of our own nation we need to look over the past few generations, not just a few years. Only from a lengthy perspective do the trends become plain.

There were, however, some clear stages or factors, some obvious turning points. The first was the enormous impact of wealth and luxury in sapping Judah of its moral strength: unparalleled affluence brought about widespread corruption, oppression, violence, adultery and wantonness. Judah was unable to handle wealth. Few nations, if any, can. The wealth of our own nation has been increasing throughout the last two centuries, reaching a rapid, almost frantic, climax as the last 50 years. The same widespread corruption, violence and wantonness is all too evident. The clear cut morality of a Christian heritage has been blurred more than ever before.

The second stage in Judah's decline saw the obliteration of a clear focus on their God. The very first, and crucial, commandment, "I am the LORD your God; you shall worship no other God but me", became too narrow and constricting for the people. It was overwhelmed by a perceived need to keep abreast with the surrounding nations and allow other "gods" due space and worship. Both economic and political pressure demanded such a turn round. It seemed totally out of keeping to hold to the past. Ahaz and Manasseh both in turn felt that the old faith in God was not really working and was the source of all Judah's problems. So they turned to alternatives, and there were many about. In our own nation the last two hundred years have seen the tempo of neglect of God and the seeking of alternatives increase to a point where the Christian heritage now appears as virtually marginalised. The dethronement of God is the most serious of all factors in the loss of the soul.

Our own nation has had a long and rich heritage of the true knowledge of God and his ways, something which has been of immeasurable value for the promotion of godliness and the health of its soul, even despite frequent lip service. It has to be a point of great danger when it spurns its Christian heritage not simply to the point of making it purely nominal, but to the point of virtually eradicating it from the centre of its public values. Nominalism is one thing, but an all-out movement toward eradication is very much more serious: it constitutes a point of no return. It is a point where the nation loses its soul. It is walking the same path as both Israel and Judah. To have known the way of God and then to tread it under foot is inviting an awful divine response.