

Nation-building 101

2 Kings 23:1-12

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Introduction

One of my favorite poets is Robert Frost, 20th-century American modernist. In his poem entitled “The Lesson for Today,” he has an imaginary debate with an 8th-century English scholar named Alcuin of York. The subject was, Which period was worse: the Dark Ages or the present? Both sides emphasize how vanity permeates our existence; Frost references Alcuin’s 24-line epitaph, a somber reminder of mortality, then ends the dialogue with these lines: “I hold your doctrine of *Memento mori*. // And were an epitaph to be my story, // I’d have a short one ready for my own. // I would have written of me on my stone: // **I had a lover’s quarrel with the world.**” Can you identify? While we love the delights of living on this earth, we experience deep frustration over the obstacles, the sorrows, all the limitations this life imposes on us (from wars, disasters, and tragedies, to frailty, illness, and death).

Background

I find that line from Frost to be most appropriate for how I feel about Spain! Please bear with me for a bit of testimony regarding my personal history with this nation. It was in 1975 when as a student in Granada I first began to be enamored of Spain (I was running away from God’s call like Jonah!). As I attended the University of Granada, I wasn’t just learning Spanish, but the culture, and Spain was a fascinating place! From the Alhambra to the Prado, and many other museums, I covered hundreds of kilometers, gawking at cathedrals, convents and castles, visiting famous caves, running with the bulls in Pamplona, taking in centuries of sights and history. But what I began to observe was **what a divided nation Spain was!** In elementary school, they had taught us how Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile united Spain by marrying and bringing their two kingdoms together. So I never imagined all the languages, regions, rivalries and conflicts that lay beneath the surface. Later when Susie and I were preparing to come as missionaries to teach at the Spanish Baptist Seminary (1988), we studied and wept through a 6-hour documentary on the Spanish Civil War that showed what an awful wound was inflicted on this nation, which to this day still festers, just as some attitudes present today can be traced back to the Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834). I’ve had “a lover’s quarrel” with this nation!

It was 1967 before Spain finally had a law of religious freedom on the books (under pressure from the US), though for a long time it was only “theory.” Progress was very slow. But in the transition from dictatorship to democracy, after Franco’s death, it’s said that “Spain changed more in those first 40 days under Juan Carlos than in the previous 40 years!” Some of the changes were not so good, but there were many positive things as well. Entrance into the E.U. meant significant economic advances, but many social values previously conservative began to be reshaped according to a new agenda. Since the new millennium, the changes have accelerated with lightning speed (“liquefaction,” as Zygmunt Bauman calls it), with “liquid modernity” now oozing into the public schools to indoctrinate children from the earliest age in the progressive “liquid” approach to human sexuality and identity. Our culture is full of examples of this, as in Disney’s new Lightyear movie; one Disney promoter says she hopes 50% of Disney characters will soon be LGBTQ. There was a stunning display of the same agenda in Spain’s Eurovision presentation back in May: the song and dance routine that won Spain 3rd place in the competition was basically an exaltation of public nudity, pornography, and prostitution.

Spiritual reflection

Jesus was hung stark naked on a cross because they wanted to humiliate Him; this was how they shamed and disgraced those whom Rome condemned, and so they were discrediting and dishonoring God Himself. But Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus didn’t give any importance to the shame of that cross; He didn’t let it affect Him, because He was too focused on His task of incarnating God’s tender mercies and forgiveness for a wayward, rebellious race. This nation used to value that, but now it’s mostly just for tourists. This nation used to have some real **spiritual values** (even if often cloaked in forms we don’t agree with), but those are being steadily trashed by the reigning philosophy. Though the ideology is popularly called “progressive,” this is not “progress.” Spain is on a collision course with truth. For those of us who are immigrants or expats here, this nation is our host. Surely we owe Spain a debt of gratitude and intercession.

Scriptural reflection

“Unless the LORD builds the house [or the nation], the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city [or the nation], the guards stand watch in vain” (Ps. 127:1-2). But is the Lord building and guarding this nation? It’s hard to see His hand behind the ruling philosophy.

“Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD ...” (Ps. 33:12). But when a nation’s direction is so contrary to God’s Word, He can hardly be called their God. So how will Spain be blessed?

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Prov. 14:34). “Righteousness” in the Old Testament especially means right-relatedness: relating rightly to God, to fellow humans, and to the world. But this requires knowing and following His Word – not the patterns we’re seeing here!

“The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men” (Ps. 12:8). We have to admit that what the Bible calls vileness is indeed being honored as good and worthy in this nation.

So what can we do for Spain when we are such a “drop in the proverbial bucket”? Has God brought you here by accident? Does our sovereign God allow things to happen and not put them to use for His kingdom purposes? Did Jesus call *politicians* to change the world, or was it *His followers*?! Jesus wept over the nation of Israel, full of compassion even as they conspired to arrest and crucify Him. Do we have no tears to shed for this nation in its downward spiral?

Israel's history

Scripture provides us a *transgenerational perspective* on Israel's history that is so telling in regard to human nature: the deceitfulness of the human heart, repeated patterns of good and evil, even moments of hope and revival. One of those took place shortly after a very dark period in Judah's history, just before the curtain came down on Jerusalem. Last week we looked at King Manasseh and his 55-year reign, most of it evil. His son lasted only 2 years before he was deposed; then those rebels were cast out, and his grandson Josiah was placed on the throne (at 8 years old). At age 16, he began to seek the Lord; at age 20 he began to purge the land of its idols and foreign altars (2 Cron. 34). At age 26, he ordered work begun on the restoration of the temple, and in that process, Hilkiah the priest discovered a copy of the law. He immediately recognized its importance, so he sent Shaphan the secretary to read it to the king. As Josiah heard those words, his heart came under such deep conviction that he tore his robes, a sign of his deep disturbance (also a sign of grief upon losing a loved one). This is what Jacob did when his sons brought him the torn and bloody clothing of Joseph. It's what God the Father did when Jesus died, as the temple veil was torn in two from top to bottom, thereby exposing the Holy of Holies, God's very heart of compassion, just as Jesus was so torn and exposed on the cross! But this was no mere symbolic gesture on Josiah's part – he was overwhelmed to hear how totally his people had failed to follow God's Word and ways; he realized Judah would reap what they had sown.

So Josiah took action, calling on his servants to seek out the prophetess Hulda, who had already received a message from the Lord for Josiah: ***“You're right that disaster is coming, but the Lord says, 'Because your heart was responsive, you humbled yourself, tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard your prayer'.”*** So Josiah took another step: he called his people together to covenant before the Lord on behalf of the nation; he had that book of the law read in their hearing. Then he “took his stand” by the pillar in the temple (symbol of his royal authority and responsibility) and made this covenant in the presence of the Lord: to follow Yahweh, to keep His commandments with all his heart and soul, to ratify the words of the covenant. Then the people also “joined in” the covenant (the Hebrew means they “took their stand” as well). Then Josiah began another campaign to rid the land of idolatry, removing items of Baal worship that his grandfather had installed in the temple, getting rid of the pagan priests and male shrine prostitutes, the altars for child sacrifices. He would make no truce with idolatry. They could not avoid the disaster that was already under way regarding their nation, only 35 years down the road, but they could take a valiant stand on behalf of their own generation.

Our response

In a similar way, you and I cannot keep this nation from the brink of social and spiritual disaster such as it has been courting since the turn of the century. But we can take a stand

as Josiah did; we can covenant together by God's grace and in Jesus' name to be a light to the nations. Of course, trying to change a city or nation by ourselves would take more work and resources than we could ever imagine. That's why we come together with the Spanish churches of Spain (UEBE) to try to impact the lostness of this nation, and with other international churches of Europe (the International Baptist Convention) to impact the lostness of this continent. Will you covenant with me to follow Jesus with all your heart and soul, to ratify His Word by praying, giving, and letting our collective light shine?