

Living Among The Ruins

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As my only prop today, I am displaying what I call my Bill Gates Tee. On its front appear the words, “Y Worry: Take Charge of Change.” Many accuse Gates, and others in similar positions, of maneuvering change to feather their own nests. People who are in positions of responsibility, often well-heeled and highly competent, leverage their wealth and position, either individually or through their corporations and foundations, to manipulate change to their advantages. The reason corporations spend billions of dollars on research and development is not just to remain competitive. That is the reason publicly ballyhooed. The fact of the matter is that the mission of R&D departments is to give the corporation a say, hopefully a loud say, in the vector of change—that is, in the speed and direction of technology’s march.

In the corporate context, individuals committed to vectoring change, again, to managing it in order to further corporate interests, become known as “change agents.” The term now has currency in many other arenas: politics, science, the arts, and certainly education. Many aspiring young people today want to grab hold of change, naively thinking they can own it, even control it—not fully grasping that they have a tiger by the tail. They view change as not only inexorable, but as a *resource* to be exploited for their personal benefit. So, as in the case of the pandemic, politicians and others milk a changing, volatile, unstructured situation to their own advantage, often distorting the truth in doing so.

In my own corporate experience, I well-remember an employee meeting wherein a vice president announced pompously, even a bit imperiously, “I am a change agent.” Well, he was so puffed up that, had he not been wearing suspenders under his buttoned tunic, I am sure he would have exploded. I braced myself for that—pun very much intended. Fact is, there is a whole lot more vainglory than glory in the title of “change agent.”

Today, I want to talk about change, not focusing on the change we as God's people associate with overcoming, growing in the mind of Christ, and certainly not on technological change. Rather, I shall focus on societal change, cultural change. I do not mean the change in what is in vogue in music or art, but rather, about change in the *nation's culture*, its lifestyle: What we believe and value, how we raise our children, how we school them, how we treat the aged, how we work and dress and deport ourselves. Culture includes everything from sexual mores to tastes in food—whether we buy into same-sex unions or traditional ones, or whether we are meat-and-potato guys or prefer Asian fusion.

It may be useful to think of culture as setting boundaries, or limits, on our prerogatives—what we can do in our lives. We are unable to do some things because they are not technologically supportable at this point. “Beam me up, Scotty,” is fanciful. Culture, in its broadest sense, sets limits, limits which become in some cases codified by laws and regulations or, less formally, by standards and conventions. Language is such a convention. In other cases, societal taboos, which, though unofficial, can be extremely strong, restrain activity. (Not everything, though, is culturally determined. For instance, God determines gender and biology defines it. However, how we dress our little boys and little girls is largely a cultural matter.)

Culture is relative to time and space. Years ago, how many parents thought nothing at all of sending their children to the park to play—some municipalities even encouraged the practice by funding large, well-equipped park facilities. But, today, some municipalities in the United States actually punish parents who do not accompany their children to a park. They consider it child-endangerment! There are some things that a South Sea islander can do which are not acceptable in Toad Suck, Arkansas. The pedophilia so acceptable in ancient Sparta is not acceptable in modern-day Why, Arizona, or even in Whynot, North Carolina—at least, not yet acceptable. And, that is telling.

We would have to be Pollyanna's grandchildren to miss the fact that American culture is quickly changing—indeed, changing before-our-very-eyes-quickly. In the forthcoming dozens of months, we will see change agents crawling out of the woodwork, some people blessing them as saviors,

others cursing them as bugbears. The changes we are seeing—and will continue to see—will be transformative, striking as they will at the foundations of American thought and doings. They will be disturbing, upsetting, and frightening. In the long term, many will be highly destructive.

My purpose today is to show that we, as the children of Light, should avidly shun the temptation to become change agents, to show, in fact, that stability does not rest with an embrace of the new (that is, of new standards and new ideas and new values and new technologies), but in a resolute grip on the *old*. I do not mean we should reject the new out of hand; washing machines really do beat washboards hands down. But, technologies, all the hoopla aside, are superficial and evanescent, never touching the real quality of our lives. Nor do I mean the word “old” to mean Buddy Holly old (in the 50s) or George Washington old. No, God’s Word instructs us not to seek stability in nostalgic gossamer, in insubstantial and unsubstantiable, “good-ole days” we might imagine existed in the generation or two before we became. Rather, God’s Word instructs us to look for stability in the Patriarchs, in Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. These were men who *worked in faith*. Their faith and works together, or we could say, their faithful walk, enabled them to grow into God’s image—and that is the *only* change that really counts.

By way of background, it was Richard Ritenbaugh’s “Handwriting on the Wall” message at the 2020 Feast of Tabernacles which brought focus to my thoughts on this topic. In that message, he mentions the penchant of certain scholars today to question every tenet and principle of civilization, everything and everyone which has any claims of authority, their drive to examine and cross-examine *all* authority, inanimate and animate—from the authority of tradition to the authority of the policeman down the street. He describes the work of these scholars using the verbs *attack*, *dismantle*, *tear down*, *pick at*, mentioning that their work is of the ilk of Apollyon himself, Satan. Nothing and none are secure from their destroying hands and minds. Most particularly, Richard’s reference to deconstructionism strikes a chord. David Barlow defines *deconstruction* as a “scheme of attacking the foundation on which a belief is based.” He continues by quoting Jack Balkin, of Yale University. Deconstruction

“effaces [maligns, smears, and undermines] the subject” by posing “a continuous critique” to “lay low what was once high.” The

popular objects of attack by Deconstructionists—that is, the things they most frequently “efface”—include “the Constitution, tradition, the family, or the history and culture of American sexual and domestic values” in order “to tear down the ancient certainties upon which Western Culture is founded.” The result of deconstructionism is a steady flow of belittling and negative portrayals of Western institutions, beliefs, and values.

With the aid of fellow deconstructionists who have wormed their way into the media and the government, the ideas of these scholars—and, even more importantly, their *spirits* of mocking cynicism and scoffing skepticism—have gained traction in more and more grassroots sectors of American culture, including the labor unions, lower schools and faith-based organizations.

I want to stress Balkin’s words: “A steady flow of belittling and negative portrayals of Western institutions. . . .” The spirit of acute skepticism displayed by deconstructionists is as evident as it is unflagging. They fire salvo after salvo at their targets, a hail of comments poking fun at the Bible or the Constitution or the practice of shaking hands. You get the idea—anything.

Nothing is sacrosanct. Sometimes the comments are biting, positively scathing, sarcastic, and accusatory, while in other cases they are subtle, framed, as in a Norman Lear sitcom, as a joke. People unthinkingly follow the laugh-track when it tells them to time to scoff at Archie Bunker’s latest idiocy—or at monogamy or at Sarah Palin, whoever or whatever the writer wants to deride. However packaged, deconstructionists craft their comments to break down the hearer’s resistance to change, or the reader’s comfort-level with the time-honored. I stress the presence of this underlying spirit of distrust of *anything* established, of *anyone* in authority.

At the same time, I discourage anyone from responding to a change agent or a deconstructionist as an innocuous contrarian, a person who, by commonly accepted connotation, swims against the flow or treads the road less traveled because he is assured that the minority is more apt to be right than the majority. Change agents love to paint themselves in those pastel, clement hues; they love saccharine metaphors of that ilk. In reality, their aims are far

darker, far more endangering than those of the garden variety contrarian who buys stocks in shoe companies rather than in tech companies.

Just how dangerous are change agents? Well, as cogent as it may appear, Balkin's closing statement is highly misleading. Remember, how he concludes: "The result of deconstructionism is a steady flow of belittling and negative portrayals of Western institutions" How intellectually enfeebled can anyone be! The result of deconstructionism, of critical theory at large, is not "portrayals" at all, not words of any type, but actions which lead to the destruction of nations. I want to be absolutely plain about that. The thoughts of deconstructionists produce words which fill books and news broadcasts and webpages—and minds. And, words-in-minds in time turn into actions, actions of protesting, actions of toppling statues, actions of creating laws. Actions.

Ever thought of what an *agent* is, as in the term "change agent?" One dictionary defines an agent as "someone or something which causes change," whether that be a chemical change or a societal one. Any change. Another definition of the noun *agent* is "a person or thing that does an action." An agent is not a thinker. An agent is not a speaker. An agent is not a writer. An agent is a doer. First and foremost, a change agent *does* change.

The thoughts filling the minds of many who want to "take charge of change" are very often the thoughts of changing American institutions, culture, and traditions in every way possible. These are the thoughts of Satan. In Isaiah 14:12, God describes Satan as the destroyer or conqueror of nations, as he who is committed to laying "the nations low." That is what Satan does. A change agent on Satan's wavelength does the same: Destroys nations.

Those introductory comments out of the way, I want to relate what Balkin terms "belittling and negative" words to biblical terminology. Quite simply, the people who spew this venom, what we read in articles, hear in the news—indeed, hear from the mouths of our leaders, are the scoffers whom Peter mentions in his second epistle. He is addressing members of God's church.

II Peter 3:3 (RSV) First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming?"

For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.” They deliberately ignore this fact that, by the word of God, heavens existed long ago, and an earth formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished.

Do not miss the fact of this last-day phenomenon, Peter fervently warns those who follow Christ, Christians. This is paramount! So vital is this point that he emphasizes it by using two related Greek nouns, one here translated *scoffer*, the other *scoffing*, here translated, “scoffers will come . . . with scoffing. . . .” These people jeer God. He then explains why these scoffers are so unbridled, so derring-do, so unrestrained in their mockery: They deny the Creator God. In their mind, He does not exist. Further, they are convinced there will be no retribution, no reaction from God. They can, therefore, act with impunity, as it were, “get away with” anything—and society will just keep going as it did in the past. This is the mindset of most Israelite leaders today, in every field, in both parties. Their passions rule them.

In a parallel passage, Jude, using the same Greek noun for *scoffers* which Peter used, refers in Jude 1:18 to “mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts.”

We have just looked at the only two passages where the noun *scoffers* appears in the *King James Version*. But do not be fooled into thinking that scoffing is an unimportant concept in the Scriptures. There are about 34 Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words which translators render with such verbs as *scorn*, *taunt*, *ridicule*, *deride*, and *mock*, or with their noun counterparts, *scoffer*, *scorner*, *mock*, *derision*, *mockery*, and *contempt*. Together, these 34 words—all carrying the general idea of mocking—appear about 233 times in God’s Word. Oftentimes they refer to people receiving mockery—as Christ did on the cross—rather than to the belittling of beliefs or traditions. Other times, God uses these words in the same way I am using them today, that is, the scoffing at long-held beliefs. An example of such a usage might be Solomon’s comment, recorded in Proverbs 14:9: “Fools scoff at the idea of guilt.” (*Evangelical Heritage Version*). Shamelessly simpering, these scoffers sneer at sin.

With that in mind, let us review a biblical example. Probably the most explicit and extended example of social change in Scripture is what happened to ten-tribed Israel under Jeroboam I. Beginning in I Kings 11, the historian describes Jeroboam's changes to religion and, by extension, to Israelite life in general, since religion touches so many areas of people's lives. His changes affected the entire Israelite culture.

In I Kings 11:26, we learn that Jeroboam was an Ephraimite, raised by a widow: at some point in his life, he came to lack the guidance of a father. Verse 28 tells how he, apparently still relatively young, came to occupy a position of responsibility in Solomon's administration. Verse 26 tells us that, somewhere along the line, he and Solomon had a significant falling out, which led to Jeroboam's flight to Egypt, where he remained until Solomon's death. Importantly, in Egypt, he undoubtedly became influenced, perhaps deeply, by *non*-Israelite thought—Gentile thought.

While in Egypt, Jeroboam apparently maintained contact with Israelite leaders, who, after Solomon's death, reached out for his support in their dealings with Solomon's son Rehoboam. He returned to Israel and led a delegation of elders to Rehoboam, asking him to "lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us" (I Kings 12:4). The break between Judah and the other tribes became a political reality when Rehoboam remained rigid, intransigent on the issue of taxation.

Fearing that the people of the northern tribes would in time find reason to return to their religious roots in Jerusalem, Jeroboam set about creating a substitute religion. His purpose was actually to deconstruct the old religion, destroy it. The contrast of I Kings 12:28 and I Kings 12:33 is intriguing. In verse 28, he sought advice from others before building the two calves which he later set up in Dan and Bethel. In verse 33, which probably narrates events taking place a bit later, he established a feast in the eighth month, a counterfeit Feast of Tabernacles, but in this case he *himself* "invented" the date; it was of his own devising. *The Voice* is not alone among versions which stress that he picked the month "according to a plan he had devised."

Indeed, the king's misleading of his people was neither piecemeal nor willy-nilly; it was, in his view, a rational course of action. Accordingly, he determined in advance the general shape the apostasy was to take—probably

based on Egyptian models. Little by little, he—not a conspiracy of rich people, but he himself, as king—used his prestige and power to implement his plan. Like the little horn of Daniel 7:25, he “thought” [that is, planned] to change the times. It is important to understand that the social change—the bashing of the old religion—which Israel experienced at this time was government instigated, government sponsored, and government controlled.

This top-down pattern remains in America to this day. The Supreme Court, most notably starting with the Warren Court of the 1950s, has bestowed upon itself the authority to establish public policy—authority in no way granted to it by the Founders. Examples of the overreach of the Court’s authority include its banning of prayer in the public schools in 1962 and the 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* striking down state laws banning homosexual activity between consenting adults.

Probably the most blatant example of the Court’s determining public policy in private matters is *Roe v. Wade*, overturning states’ laws against abortion in 1973 and setting dangerous precedent for legislation permitting infanticide and senicide in the future. In tens of other decisions, the Supreme Court has determined how municipalities will run transit systems and cities their schools. The Supreme Court has set itself up as the final authority of American culture.

Yet another fine example of the Federal government’s fundamental role in vectoring cultural change is the university grant system, where the Federal government pays selected “authorities”—authorities *it* has chosen and bought—to “study” into matters of scientific or social interest. The government then often implements the new ideas offered by these so-called authorities, based on their research. (This research, funded by the government, is hardly the paragon of objectivity!) We have here a cozy relationship indeed, a misbegotten synergy—an unholy alliance—between the universities and government, providing the schools with money and the government the intellectual wherewithal to change public policy in any way it sees fit and at any time it.

Bottom line: The federally-funded research grant system is a means by which the government controls the direction science takes—and the direction society takes as well. To deflect criticism or opposition, the government need

only cite the “scientific proof” contained in the “professionally conducted” studies it has funded to legitimize changes in public policy. This tack is as obvious as your thumb in the “climate change” debate. The “invention” of umpteen genders is another example of the government’s misuse of science to serve its own purposes.

Fourteen times, the books of I and II Kings refer to the “sins of Jeroboam.” These were a complex of sins involving idolatry and apostasy, the rejection of God’s revelation at Sinai centuries earlier. He not only rejected God; he led his people to do so. Twelve of those fourteen times, God appends the formula, in reference to Jeroboam, “who sinned and who made Israel sin” (or similar language). The king’s *actions* ramified out to *all* Israel. We read in II Kings 17:22, where God summarizes the reasons He exiled Israel, that the people “did not depart” from those sins. Metaphorically, Jeroboam *trampled* on God’s law, which formed the basis of Israelite culture from the days of the theocracy under Moses. Is it any wonder that God acted as I Kings 13:34 testifies: “And this thing was the sin of the house of Jeroboam, so as to exterminate and destroy it from the face of the earth?” For emphasis, the Hebrew uses *two* strong verbs there, represented here as *exterminate* and *destroy*.

The biblical narrative of Jeroboam I exposes how *ruinous* and how *durable* are the directed, concerted, and prolonged governmental attacks on a people’s culture. The effects of the current pandemic pale in comparison to the effects of the governmental attacks on the culture of America, attacks which have lasted for several decades now.

We know, of course, that these attacks provide no reason, no excuse at all, for God’s people to reject (or to rebel against) the government. God asks that His people endure change, not join resistance movements in rebellion against it. Ours is to overcome the angst and anger change so often engenders, at the same time growing into Christ’s image.

The effect of the elite’s continued and methodical attack on Israelite culture *today* will be to leave her a wasteland marked by broken statues and fallen institutions *tomorrow*. The prophet Isaiah addresses this matter.

Isaiah 51:17-18 Awake, awake! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of His fury; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling, and drained it out. There is no one to guide her among all the sons she has brought forth.

The prophet decries the lack of responsible leadership. The people as a whole are sapped, unwilling and unable to fight for anything. What is there to fight for? In today's context, we might ask: "Fight for the American way?" "Fight for freedom?" The deconstructionists are dismissive of both, teaching the people that they are of dubious value because they have their genesis in racial hypocrisy. Yet, the cynics and critics and skeptics offer nothing to replace these valuable commodities.

In verse 21, God says the people are "drunk, but not with wine." They are disoriented, unable to think clearly, staggering, but alcohol itself is *not* the cause. Something else has garbled or scrambled these people's thinking so much as to render them helpless in the face of their enemies. And that "something else" is a spirit of nihilism. Nihilism is the result of deconstructionism. The noun *nihilism* comes from the Latin word *nihil*, which means "nothing." One critic of deconstructionism seems right when he asserts that deconstructionists "learn more and more about less and less until eventually they come to know everything about nothing."

Nihilism leaves a people with nothing to believe in, the resigned acceptance of the notion that nothing matters, because nothing is good, nothing is clean, nothing is pure, nothing is right. Everything is askew; everything is cockeyed; everything is off-center. The deconstructionists have taught them that everything—the Bible, the Constitution, liberty, capitalism, the family, marriage, the history taught in the old textbooks, Doctor Seuss, Disneyland, Mother Goose, nursery rhymes—everything they once considered to be good or at least acceptable is flawed and therefore everything is untrustworthy—and by that token everything is undeserving of their allegiance. Not worth fighting for. Time is, as Hamlet came to believe, "out of joint." All the props, all the supports, all that ever gave them any meaning in life, are gone. Nothing left.

With that as background, consider the opening of the chapter.

Isaiah 51:1-2 “Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him.”

Here, God is not addressing apostate Jerusalem, His audience in verse 17. He is addressing us, His children who pursue righteousness, seeking it with all our being. We have Abraham; we have Sarah. We have neither bought into the sly fabrications of deconstructionist preachers nor have we accepted their spirit of *contempt* for the things of God. Abraham becomes a type of Christ, the Rock, from which we are hewn. We reflect His characteristics, if you will; we share the same characteristics as Christ. Indeed, we bear His name, to use a colloquial idiom, “chip off the old block.” Christ Himself provided commentary on this passage.

Matthew 16:18 “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter [that is, *petros*, a fragment of a larger stone], and on this rock [*petra*, a large stone] I will build My church.”

Why does God ask that we “look to” Abraham and Sarah? They are not merely historical fixtures, but serve as exemplars of faith *and* works. Their lives demonstrate the paramount importance God places on faith: “The just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4), walk and work in faith. Faith and works are not irreconcilable opposites, but rather two sides of the same coin. In connection to faith *and* works, the apostle James mentions Abraham in his epistle to the dispersed twelve tribes.

James 2:20-24 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says,

“Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” [referencing Genesis 15:6]. And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

In a parallel passage, Romans 4, the apostle Paul also refers to Abraham as “our father” and also refers to Genesis 15:6. He introduces Abraham in verse 1: “What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh” (Revised Standard Version)? He continues in verse 3: “For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Later in the chapter, Paul makes another, more oblique, reference to Genesis 15:6. Here, the apostle makes the point that God is dealing with us in the same way He dealt with Abraham.

Romans 4:23-24 Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.

In the book of Galatians, Paul yet again refers to Genesis 15:6, in his discussion of *Abraham, faith*. This time, he adds the Gentiles to the mix.

Galatians 3:5-9 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

We shall not go through the intricacies of Paul’s argument here. I shall just point you to his concluding remarks. The apostle here addresses the members of the church—Israelites and Gentiles alike. These are the *true children of Abraham because they do the same works Abraham did—believe in Christ as a gift from God*, referencing John 6:29.

Galatians 3:26-29 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Paul refers there to the promise of the Abrahamic covenant, of course. His comments in Galatians and probably Romans 4 elaborate on those of Christ in His discussion with some Pharisees and scribes, recorded in John 8. Here, Christ ascribes sonship of Abraham to those who *do the works* of Abraham—works based on *faith* in God. Christ is speaking.

John 8:37-38 “I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.”

Christ here distinguishes between His Father and the father of the Pharisees. They are not related.

John 8:39-41 They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father.”

We know, of course, that Christ, shooting straight from the hip in verse 44, tells the Pharisees that they demonstrate who their father is by *doing* the works of Satan. What is important, Christ is saying, is that, *spiritually*, they are Satan's children. He continues in verses 45-47, telling them that they cannot believe Him, that is, they cannot have the *faithfulness* toward God which characterized Christ's relationship with His Father, because they are not of God. That Greek pronoun *of* there is *ek*, and means they were not *from* God, not born of God. They lacked Him as their father.

Abraham, who in faith did the works of God, remains our example to this day. God's people are to look to him, not to any other historical figure, like Abraham Lincoln—not to any political figure, as David Grabbe mentioned ["Implications of the Gospel of the Kingdom"]; not to any political cause, like conservatism, not to any political party—brethren, to *any* political party. We shall not find respite from the vortex of misdirected change, Satanically-induced change, by looking in those places. It simply isn't there.

Let us go back Isaiah 51 once again, this time looking at the theme of ruination.

Isaiah 51:3 For the Lord will comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places; He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord.

Part of my argument is that American elites are in the process of tearing down American culture, leaving it in ruins. Now, I am using that word *ruins* (or in biblical terms, the nouns *desolations* or *waste places*) metaphorically, because it is clear that America is not in actual ruins at this moment. Neither her culture nor her land is a desolation today—though they are becoming that way more and more. I am saying that metaphorically, figuratively, American *culture* is in ruins—or pretty close to it. Does God's Word support the metaphorical use of noun *ruins* in the way I am using it?

In Isaiah 51:3, God, speaking of Zion, says He will “comfort all her waste places.” The *Amplified Bible* says He “will comfort all her ruins.” He continues, saying that His restoration of Israel's fortunes will be so comprehensive that desert and wilderness will eventually be like Eden was. Surely, God is referring to areas which have suffered devastation and are, in fact, ruined, whether by fire, blast, radiation, flood, wind, hail, earthquake—or a combination of these factors. In this case, wasting and ruin are very real, the *literal* results of war and calamity. Ruin follows calamity, a frequent theme in the Scriptures. God judges a people with war or pestilence, resulting in the ruination of their land. So, water left the antediluvian world upended; brimstone left Sodom desolate; the plagues left Egypt quite literally in ruins.

In Ezekiel 33 God seems to use the word *ruins* figuratively. I mean, where a people's culture is in ruins, while their cities are still standing and—at least apparently—thriving. Here, God's people seem to be living in ruined circumstances *before* the judgmental calamity, which then finishes them off, leaving them and their land in total—*real*—ruin. You might think of it this way: before the calamity, they lived in ruins in figure, while *after* the calamity they lived in ruins in fact. The first ruin is figurative, the second, actual.

In verse 21 of Ezekiel 33, a refugee from Jerusalem reaches the captives at their concentration camp in the Babylonian Empire. These would be the captives taken by the Babylonians in an earlier wave of deportations. He announces that the Babylonians have destroyed Jerusalem. Actually, the time markers indicate that Jerusalem fell five months earlier; it took him that long to get to the concentration camp.

God apparently gave Ezekiel foreknowledge of this turn of events, for on the night before the refugee arrived, as verse 22 says, God's hand was upon him and he was able to speak. It is important to realize that Ezekiel did *not* speak of Jerusalem's fall *per se*; that tragedy was not on the prophet's mind. Rather, he speaks of the cities of Israel, which had themselves fallen decades and decades earlier—to the Assyrians. Importantly, Jerusalem is not Ezekiel's subject: Israel is. So, this is a prophecy for Israelites and their standing cities *today*. Notice carefully what he says:

Ezekiel 33:23-24 Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: “Son of man, they who inhabit [present tense] those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, ‘Abraham was only one, and he inherited the land. But we are many; the land has been given to us as a possession.’”

Notice, God is talking about the “land of Israel,” not Jerusalem. The people of Israel feel that God gave them the land, and He will not take it away. Ezekiel's contemporaries with him there in the camp in the Babylonian Empire are not saying this. They are exiles, already having lost the land, with no prospect of returning soon, no power. The people Ezekiel is addressing are modern-day Israelites, those who believe, “It can't happen here—not to America. This is the land “under God,” as we say. We are too strong—and

too enlightened. After all, we are diverse and tolerant! Just look at us: we have even outlawed hate speech!” God addresses this faulty line of thinking in verse 26: “You rely on your sword, you commit abominations, and you defile one another’s wives. Should you then possess the land?”

Ezekiel 33:27 “Say thus to them [to modern Israel, not to the people of Jerusalem who suffered defeat five months earlier], ‘Thus says the Lord God: “As I live, surely those who are [present tense] in the ruins shall fall by the sword, and the one who is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in the strongholds and caves shall die of the pestilence.

What is happening here? Well, there are a number of people in the cities *living* in ruins. *Living* in ruins. They have not yet been killed, captured, exiled. Now, compare that situation with the one rehearsed in the next two verses.

Ezekiel 33:28-29 For I will make [future] the land most desolate, her arrogant strength shall cease, and the mountains of Israel [not Jerusalem] shall be so desolate that no one will pass through. Then they shall know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land most desolate because of all their abominations which they have committed.”

Both verses 28 and 29 clearly refer to the time God would bring Israel into *actual* ruin. The calamity comes—typically it was the fall of Jerusalem, but antotypically it is the prophesied fall of modern-day Israel—calamity comes and the people, who had been *living in ruins before* the crash, die or scatter, while their land becomes an *actual* waste. Some translations clarify: “Those who are among the city ruins in Israel will be killed in war” (*Expanded Bible*). At that time, God will make the ruins not just a metaphor, but an actuality, as verse 28, says. God *will* “make the land an uninhabitable waste” (*Common English Bible*). Again, this is a prophecy for Israel, for Jerusalem was *already* wasted when Ezekiel spoke.

The people living in the ruins *before* the fall lived in figurative ruins, that is, cultural ruins, a moral wasteland, having turned their religious values into a lifeless desert through idolatry or, more generally, through covenant

breaking. My point is that, sometimes, the concept of ruins or wastelands in the Scriptures is metaphorical rather than literal. In the example at Ezekiel 33, both types of ruins, figurative and then real, come into view in a prophecy about modern-day, secular Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah weighs in on the subject of holding on to the ancient ways. As verse nine indicates, the audience of Jeremiah 6 is “the remnant of Israel.”

Jeremiah 6:16-19 Thus says the Lord: “Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; then you will find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ Also, I set watchmen over you, saying, ‘Listen to the sound of the trumpet!’ But they said, ‘We will not listen.’”

The image is of a people standing at the ways—plural in Hebrew—that is, a crossroad, perhaps a fork in the road. Just as in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, they are faced with a decision: Which path or road should we *choose*? Like the proverbial, “Should we take to high road or the low road?” The first use of the Hebrew noun rendered *paths* here is instructive.

Judges 5:6 In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were deserted, and the travelers walked along the byways.

Just as the English uses discrete nouns, highways and byways, so the Hebrew uses different nouns. The noun here translated *byways* is the same word appearing at Jeremiah 6:16, “ask for the old paths.” It refers to a narrow pathway—even a footpath—as distinct from the noun rendered *highways*, which often connotes a well-trodden road, even a major artery. In context, people during the time of the Judges often had to take narrow footpaths to avoid encountering marauding enemies on the major roads, enemies who would rob or shanghai them. In the Jeremiah passage, God says to seek the time-honored byways rather than the well-travelled highways. This is akin to the advice Christ offers in Matthew 7. I shall quote from a highly over-translated paraphrase, but one which does a good job on this passage.

Matthew 7:13-14 (*The Voice*) There are two paths before you; you may take only one path. One doorway is narrow. And one door is wide. Go through the narrow door. For the wide door leads to a wide path, and the wide path is broad; the wide, broad path is easy, and the wide, broad, easy path has many, many people on it; but the wide, broad, easy, crowded path leads to death. Now then, that narrow door leads to a narrow road that in turn leads to life. It is hard to find that road. Not many people manage it.

Before we go back to Jeremiah 6, I want to look briefly at Jeremiah 18, where we find an interesting elaboration on this theme of choosing roads.

Jeremiah 18:14-16 Will a man leave the snow water of Lebanon, which comes from the rock of the field? Will the cold flowing waters be forsaken for strange waters? Because My people have forgotten Me, they have burned incense to worthless idols. And they have caused themselves to stumble in their ways, from the ancient paths, to walk in pathways and not on a highway, to make their land desolate.

At first blush, this passage appears to contradict Jeremiah 6 and Matthew 7; it seems to suggest that Israel *should* be walking on the broad way, the highway. Is it really saying that? I included the couplet in verse 14 to show context; verse 15 is parallel to it. Verse 14 clues us into the meaning of verse 15. In verse 14, God asks if anyone would forsake waters which are known to be refreshing for “strange waters” whose purity is unverified, uncertain. Is it really healthful to drink water of uncertified purity? Is drinking that water a good decision?

The Hebrew verb behind that English adjective *strange* means “a stranger” or can refer to that which is profane. For instance, it is the word appearing at Leviticus 10:1 in reference to the “strange fire” offered by Nadab and Abihu. It appears six times in the book of Proverbs in reference to a strange woman. Clearly, the word commonly carries a pejorative—a bad—connotation.

In verse 15, the parallel couplet, God is saying that Israel has stumbled from the old paths. The *Contemporary English Version* has it that Israel has turned to “an unknown path,” that is, an unproven one, like water of uncertified

purity. The *Christian Standard Bible* refers to “new paths.” Fenton translates it as “unpaved by-paths.” The *Good News Translation* renders it “unmarked paths.” The *New English Translation* refers to Israel’s taking “roads that are not smooth and level.”

Jeremiah 18:16 tells us where this bumpy road leads: The *Common English Bible* has it: “They have ruined their country / and brought utter shame on it.” By metaphorically choosing to walk on unproven, poorly marked roads, accepting new and unproven standards and mores offered by godless intellectuals, opting for a road lacking the guideposts of God’s law, preferring to take a road lacking the sign of His covenant, the Sabbath, choosing a road lacking the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, circumcision, Americans are turning their culture into ruins. Proverbs 14:12 has application: “There is a way that seems right to a man, / but its end is the way of death.” That noun *way* there is the same Hebrew word behind “the new paths” in Jeremiah 18:15.

We shall leave Jeremiah 18 now and return to chapter 6. At Jeremiah 6:16, God tells the people standing in the road to ask for (or opt for) the *old* paths because they are “good.” As a parallel passage in Deuteronomy 32 the same Hebrew word for *old* appears. It is often rendered “everlasting,” “ancient,” and “perpetual.” As used in the contexts I am today, it describes the path to eternal life.

Deuteronomy 32:7 “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you. . . .

Of course, the old ways refer to those of our father Abraham, or the Patriarchs in general. But, twice in the Jeremiah 6 passage, the people demur. In verse 16, they refuse to take the old paths. In verse 17, they refuse to listen to the watchmen, the warning words of the prophets God sends to Israel. What is the result of their refusal to heed God?

Jeremiah 6:18 Therefore hear, you nations [of Israel], and know, O congregation [probably a reference to God’s people], what is among them.

That is, hear what is coming upon you. In the next verse, God expands His audience to include the whole earth.

Jeremiah 6:19 Hear, O earth! Behold, I will certainly bring calamity on this people—the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not heeded My words nor My law, but rejected it.

The *God'S WORD Translation* renders it this way.

Jeremiah 6:19 I'm going to bring disaster on these people. It is the result of their own plots, because they won't pay attention to My words.

In this regard, concerning Israel, you may want to reference another passage in Isaiah.

Isaiah 59:7 Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.

Destruction. That is where the road Israel is taking leads. To depart from the old paths is, first and foremost, to think, to think of new ideas which are not in agreement with God's *ancient* revelation—that is the same revelation, the same Gospel, He gave to Abraham, as we read earlier. Those thoughts eventually lead to actions. And, the result of those actions, that is, the consequences of the wicked deeds the godless perform, is destruction. In this sense, deconstructionism is merely a big word for destruction. It begins in rejecting the *old* ways. True Christians must never, never make that mistake.

Proverbs 1 is also applicable. I shall conclude here. In context, this chapter is the pleading of a father to his son, asking that he “hear the instruction of your father, / and do not forsake the law of your mother” (verse 8). (The apostle Paul offered the same advice to Timothy, you remember.) In other words, this unnamed father is asking his son not to depart from the *old* ways he learned as a child.

Proverbs 1:28-30 (*New International Reader's Version*) Then you will call to Me [God]. But I won't answer. You will look for Me. But you won't find Me. You hated knowledge. you didn't choose to have respect for the Lord. You wouldn't accept My advice. You turned your backs on My warnings.

They refused to listen to the watchmen God provided for them. They chose the wrong path.

Proverbs 1:31-32 So you will eat the fruit of the way you have lived. You will choke on the fruit of what you have planned. The wrong path that childish people take will kill them.

Better terms for “childish people” might be “open-minded” people or “accepting” people, those who swallow anything without careful consideration or who are so tolerant, so lacking in conviction, that they will buy into any *new* idea with only the most superficial deliberation. The Hebrew adjective rendered *childish* also appears in verse 4. Notice especially, however, verse 22, where it appears twice, translated respectively as *naïve* and *simplistic*:

Proverbs 1:22 (*New American Standard Bible*) How long, you naive ones, will you love simplistic thinking? And how long will scoffers delight themselves in scoffing?

Remember how we saw in II Peter 3:3 that the apostle used the words *scoffers* and *scoffing* in the same breath for emphasis. In Proverbs 1:22, we see much the same: *Scoffers take pleasure in scoffing*. In the Hebrew the two words translated *scoffers* and *scoffing* actually appear back-to-back.

The root of the Hebrew adjective underlying the word *childish* is a verb which often means “to be open minded,” “simple,” “naïve,” “gullible.” It carries the idea of being deceived, allured, flattered, or enticed. That verb appears as *entice* earlier in the chapter, in verse 10: “My son, if sinners entice you, / Do not consent.” One of the most well-known of its twenty-

eight appearances is in I Kings 22:20-22, where it appears thrice as the verb *persuade*. God, in counsel, asks, “Who will persuade Ahab” that is, entice him to go into battle that he may die? Gullible Ahab chose the wrong path. And, die gullible Ahab does. The path which gullible people take, people who refuse to be instructed by God, leads to death.

For years now, American elites have chosen the wrong path. The gullible American public, lacking responsible religious guidance for generations, has been all too willing to follow them without question. And so it is that *both* the governed and the governors are trampling on the American way of life and will eventually fall into the same ditch. The whole body is sick, as Isaiah 1:5-6 points out. This ruinous trampling will surely continue.

Make no mistake about it: The toppling of a park statue leaves more than debris and divots on the green. Also lost is a certain and measurable part of the nation’s history and heritage, the remembrances of people who had a role in making America, for good or ill. The topplers labor under the misconception that they can fix today by denying yesterday. They fail to understand that, if those who do not learn from history eventually relive it, then those who deny history eventually destroy themselves. You cannot correct today by denying yesterday any more than you can expiate sin by denying it.

We, as God’s people, cannot stop the change agents all around us; indeed, God has not commissioned us to stop them. That is not our job. But we can ensure that we are not of their spirit—a spirit of rebellion, a spirit cynicism, and a spirit of lawlessness. Displaying the faithfulness of the Patriarchs, we travel the old paths with Abraham and with Sarah. In John 8:56, Christ notifies us that Abraham, through eyes of faith, saw Christ’s day “and was glad.” Perhaps, in a vision, He saw Christ coming in power and great glory.

Having those same eyes of faith, let us also rejoice in the sure coming of God’s government, all the time working with Him to produce that character which will permit us to be in His Kingdom.