

# LESSONS FROM HISTORY

By Jim Seghers

In C.S Lewis' insightful work, *The Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape lauds the demonic success in seducing intellectuals to adopt the Historical Point of View. Screwtape explained its meaning to his inexperienced nephew Wormwood: "The Historical Point of View, put briefly, means that when a learned man is presented with any statement in an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true."<sup>1</sup> Then he goes on to instruct Wormwood on the importance of this tactic: "And since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time, it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truths of another."<sup>2</sup>

Because I have never embraced The Historical Point of View I believe mining the wisdom of the past is more profitable than digging for gold. Recent converging events aroused my interest in exploring this subject. Minor eye surgery limited both my reading and driving, but it created the occasion to become saturated in the news of the day that focuses on the events the media pundits' judge to be the important issues: the economy, politics, natural disasters and conflicts. These topics are endlessly dissected and analyzed, often with the passionate fervor of a revivalist - my apology to revivalists. After many hours of listening to this regurgitation I was amazed at the energy devoted to the symptoms that negatively impact society and the blindness to their root cause.

A ray of genuine insight occurred on Sunday, May 1 (celebrated as Divine Mercy Sunday in the Catholic Church) during the beatification of John Paul II. It's still too soon to fully grasp the amazing influence of this remarkable man. However, one man who experienced his impact on the former Soviet Union was Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of the USSR. He introduced his wife to John Paul II with these words on December 1, 1989: "Raisa Maximovna, I have the honor to introduce the highest moral authority on earth."<sup>3</sup> That remarkable statement was true on a surface level, because the highest moral authority on earth is God - the authoritative source on any Pope's influence.

John Paul II understood that *culture* not military might, wealth or political systems directs the destiny of men and nations. Imbedded in the word culture is the word *cult*, that is, the deepest values that determine what we truly worship. Jesus summarized it this way: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). Culture determines what we stake our lives on. It expresses and reveals our core values. Communism proclaimed a godless society in which only material things mattered. Secular societies simply treat God as irrelevant. In contrast, for example, John Paul II proclaimed to the people of Poland that real power and happiness resides in the right worship of God. Communism had no answer

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<sup>1</sup> *The Screwtape Letters*, Harper: San Francisco, Letter 27, pp. 150-151

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, p. 602.

for authentic Christianity. The Soviet Union crumbled. Similarly, our bickering over spending, taxes, jobs, military adventures, self-defense, corruption come into a sharp focus and are resolvable when genuine Christianity is embraced. Sadly, this is not our present experience so we experience political maneuvering and posturing with endless debates about the inessentials.

Let me illustrate my point with two historical examples drawn from the Bible. After King Solomon's death his kingdom split. Ten northern tribes formed the Kingdom of Israel and made Jeroboam their king. Solomon's son Rehoboam became the ruler of the southern kingdom called the Kingdom of Judah, which included the large tribe of Judah and the small tribe of Benjamin. The term Jews comes from Judah.

During King Ahaz' reign the Kingdom of Judah faced a grave crisis. The larger Kingdom of Israel formed an alliance with the powerful kingdom of Syria. Militarily Judah seemed helpless. The politically expedient thing to do was to prepare for war and seek safety in a more powerful political alliance. Ahaz did two things. He inspected Jerusalem's water supply in preparation for a long siege and he entered into an alliance with the emerging empire of Assyria, which alone was far more powerful than the alliance between Israel and Syria. Good solution? Not really. Decisions that are only based on secular values and political expediencies have a price.

The alliance made Judah Assyria's political vassal. Moreover<sup>4</sup> that covenant required Ahaz to worship the gods of Assyria. After Ahaz visited the main Assyrian temple in Damascus, he commanded the priests to erect a replica of the Assyrian altar in Jerusalem. In this way the true worship of the living God was perverted into the pagan cult of the Assyrians. Ahaz even adopted the horrible practice of child sacrifice by sacrificing his own son (2 Kgs 16:3-4). Of course, the very idea of child sacrifices is abhorrent to the enlightened societies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. So it is given the kinder, gentler name, pro-choice.

The prophet Isaiah offered Ahaz a far better alternative, trust in God, be faithful to his laws, and do not fear the threat from Syria and Israel. God even offered Ahaz a supernatural sign: "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be as deep as Sheol [the abode of the dead] or as high as heaven" (Is 7:10). Ahaz trusted his secular plan not God. When he feigned piety by not wanting to put God to the test, Isaiah prophesied that Yahweh would preserve the house of David in a way Ahaz could not have imagined:

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a *virgin* shall conceive and bear a son; and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]" (Is 7:14).

The Hebrew word *almah* literally means a young unmarried maiden. The rabbis who translated the Old Testament into Greek about two hundred years before Christ understood two things about this prophesy. *Almah* meant a virgin and the birth would be out of this world, namely, "deep as Sheol or high as heaven" (Is 7:14). Therefore they used the Greek word *parthenos*, which means a virgin. Ahaz rejected God's offer and he abandoned the faith in the true God. Nevertheless, that wondrous sign appeared centuries later when a virgin conceived the savior of the world (Mt 1:23).

Isaiah warned Ahaz: "If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established" (Is 7:9). Ahaz chose to place his faith in Assyria. It was a disastrous decision for David's kingdom. In 722 B.C. Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported most of the ten tribes throughout their vast kingdom where they lost their Hebrew identity. They became the lost ten tribes. The Assyrians also imported five pagan peoples to settle in Israel. The inter marriages of these pagan tribes with the remnant of the Hebrew people produced the Samaritans. After the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel, Assyria cast its rapacious appetite on the Kingdom of Judah.

Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, was destined to face the full fury of the ruthless Assyrian war machine. All the cities in the Southern Kingdom except Jerusalem were conquered. Jerusalem seemed doomed as an overwhelming force besieged the city. The Assyrian envoys boasted in the name of King Sennacherib before the walls of Jerusalem that no god could deliver Jerusalem from the mighty Assyrian army:

"Who among all the gods of these countries have delivered their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem, out of my hand" (Is 36:20).

King Hezekiah rent his garments in mourning at this mockery of Yahweh. Then the king went to the Temple to pray for God's help. Unlike his father Ahaz, whose first reaction to a military threat was to inspect Jerusalem's defenses, Hezekiah turned to prayer and summoned the prophets to intercede for Judah. Isaiah gave him the same message of hope he delivered to Ahaz: "Do not be afraid" (Is 7:4; 37:6). Ahaz did what was politically acceptable; Hezekiah trusted in God even against overwhelming odds.

During the siege Jerusalem's fate hung by a thread. The entire surrounding territory of Judah was laid waste by one of the fiercest armies the Middle East had ever known and the king became deathly ill. However, the king's trust in God never wavered. Hezekiah prayed: "I have walked before thee in faithfulness and with a noble heart, and have done what is good in thy sight" (2 Kgs 20:3). As the king lay dying God sent Isaiah to deliver a sign of hope that both Hezekiah and his kingdom will be saved from death. The shadow of the sundial will move back ten steps (2 Kgs 20:1-10). This reversal of the shadow of light depicted Yahweh's coming redemption. Hezekiah recovered and the siege was lifted when a mysterious plague struck the Assyrian army.

These two narratives about two kings facing a crisis that threatened the existence of their kingdom illustrate the fundamental choice that all men and their societies face, namely, which God will I worship and serve? This is the fundamental issue Americans face today. At the present moment what do you think? Is our choice more in line with Ahaz or Hezekiah?