

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

II Kings

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2014

David, Jesus' Ancestor

"I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star." – Revelation 22:16

II Kings chapters 1-3 – "A Double Share of Elijah's Spirit"

In these chapters we come to the end of the life of the great prophet, Elijah. He will be succeeded by the prophet Elisha who prays for a "double share" of Elijah's spirit (II Kings 2:9). Once again Judah and Israel join forces, this time against the threat of Moab. The nation of Israel however continues its downward path..

I. Consulting the Demons – chapter 1

After a brief statement informing us that Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of King Ahab, we are told that his son, Ahaziah had an accident where he fell through the lattice in his upper chamber. Seriously injured, he sends messengers to inquire of the pagan god, Baal-zebub, if he will recover. The original meaning of this name was essentially "lord of heaven." Israel later changed it to Baal-zebub meaning "lord of the flies." By the time of the New Testament "Beelzebul" was synonymous with a demon, if not the devil himself (Matthew 12:24). This shows how far the house of Ahab had declined that his son prefers to consult a demonic figure rather than the true God of Israel.

Ahaziah's messengers are confronted on their journey by Elijah who tells them to go back (II Kings 1:3). Elijah then adds that Ahaziah will die because of his faithlessness (II Kings 1:4). Ahaziah recognizes the description of the prophet as "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist" (II Kings 1:8). He knows this is Elijah. What he does not know is that this description of Elijah points forward to John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4). When Ahaziah learns of this, he becomes infuriated and orders a contingent of fifty soldiers to go and capture Elijah. However, Elijah calls down fire from heaven and consumes them (II Kings 1:9-10). A second group of fifty is sent and they suffer the same fate (II Kings 1:11-12). A third group is now sent. The commander of this last group realizes that they cannot contend with the divine power that Elijah is able to invoke. The commander pleads with Elijah to spare him and his men. The Lord speaks to Elijah and tells him to go back with the officer to the king. Elijah pronounces his judgment on the king in person (II Kings 1:15-16) who dies soon afterward (II Kings 1:17). Ahaziah is succeeded by his brother, Jehoram, who has the same name as the son of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The house of Ahab continues under God's judgment for its idolatry. Jezebel is still alive – and active.

II. Elijah and the Chariots of Fire – chapter 2

Elijah has apparently been told by the Lord that he will soon be taken up to heaven. Elijah is on his way from Gilgal to Bethel and he tells Elisha to remain behind in Gilgal. Yet, Elisha protests and insists on accompanying Elijah (II Kings 2:2). They encounter a company of prophets who have received the word about Elijah's imminent departure (II Kings 2:3). Once again, Elijah tells Elisha to remain and again he insists on going with Elijah (II Kings 2:4). This occurs again at the Jordan River (II Kings 2:6). Elisha is insistent. He says, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you" (II Kings 2:6). Elijah then asks what he can do for Elisha. In one of the most famous requests in Scripture Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit (II Kings 2:9). Elijah responds that Elisha has asked for a "hard thing" (II Kings 2:10). However, Elijah adds that if Elisha sees him being taken away, he will receive his request. As they are walking together, a chariot of fire appears and takes Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind (II Kings 2:11). Elisha calls after him, but as Elijah disappears into heaven, he tears his clothes (II Kings 2:12). Then in an important symbolic gesture Elisha picks up the mantle of Elijah (II Kings 2:13).

This represents the important pattern of a disciple following in the footsteps of his or her teacher. There is a line of prophets and apostles that continues to this day. Around the time that the great evangelist Billy Sunday died, Billy Graham went forward in an evangelistic meeting and gave his life to Christ. Billy Graham became in effect the "Billy Monday" to Billy Sunday. Charles Hodge at Princeton Seminary was regarded by many as the greatest American evangelical theologian of his time. However, his successor, Benjamin B. Warfield, was arguably even greater. Warfield had a major impact on a Scottish student John Mackay who went on to be the leading Protestant missionary in Latin America in the twentieth century and then himself became the President of Princeton Seminary. He in turn had a direct effect on the Rev. Dr. Frank Hunger here at Grace Presbyterian Church which led to the establishment of our church missions program over sixty years ago. When Moses died, the mantle was given over to Joshua. God always provides a prophet to proclaim his Word. We need to celebrate history not as the "good old days" but rather as a continuing example of God's faithfulness.

This chapter concludes with three brief but rather puzzling stories. First the prophets want to go looking for Elijah's body (Did they think he might have fallen out of the flying chariot? Would the spirit of the Lord have thrown him out? Really?). Elisha tells them not to bother, but they shame him into giving them his permission (II Kings 2:17). Why he should have felt ashamed is not clear. When they come back after three days of searching and finding no sign, Elisha basically says, "Didn't I tell you?" (II Kings 2:18). Next, Elisha performs a miracle by purifying the water in a spring that provided water for the city (II Kings 2:19-22). Finally, there is the rather strange and unpleasant story of the small boys of Bethel who make fun of him and tell him to go away. Elisha then curses them in the name of the Lord (!) and in response two she bears come out of the woods and maul the boys! The number forty-two is probably symbolic (Revelation 11:2; 13:5). The only sense I can make of this story is that there is some demonic presence in the boys.

III. The Rebellion of Moab – chapter 3 –

We now have an account of the King of Moab who, after the death of Ahab, refuses to provide Israel with a regular provision of sheep and rams' wool (II Kings 3:4-5). Presumably then, there was some hold over Moab. This issue of the sheep and rams' wool affected not only Israel, but Judah and Edom as well. Israel, at this point, is under the rule of Ahab's second son, Jehoram. He, too, is an evil ruler, but at last not to the extent that Ahab and Jezebel has been (II Kings 3:2).

As the three kings of Judah, Israel and Edom set out to force Moab into compliance, they face the fact after seven days that they can find no water. They raise the familiar question, "Is there no prophet of the Lord here . . . ?" (II Kings 3:11). The obvious answer is that there is, Elisha, of course. Elisha, however, wants nothing to do with Jehoram. On the other hand, he is favorably disposed to Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah. Elisha then goes on to prophesy that the Lord will hand Moab over to the three kings. The power of the Lord comes upon him as he is listening to music (II Kings 3:15). The prophecy is confirmed by the sudden appearance of water without wind or rain (II Kings 3:17).

The Mopabites prepare to attack. However, they see the water which Elisha prophesized as blood (II Kings 3:22). They assume wrongly that the kings have fought among themselves (II Kings 3:23). They then attack, but face a devastating defeat (II Kings 3:24-25). When the king of Moab realizes that the battle is lost as a last desperate maneuver he sacrifices his first born son (II Kings 3:27). Israel is so overwhelmed by the horror of this that they withdraw rather than confirm the victory God has given them.

The sacrifice of the firstborn was regarded as the ultimate offering one could make to the gods. In a distorted way this points to the truly ultimate sacrifice of God's only Son.

Questions for Us –

1. What does the relationship between Elijah and Elisha teach us about the nature of ministry and service?
2. How do we deal with difficult texts like Elisha sending out the she-bears to attack the mocking children?
3. Do you think Elisha's statement to Jehoram that he will give him "neither a look nor a glance" is justified considering that Jehoram claims to be coming to Elisha because the Lord has sent him (II Kings 3:13)?
4. What do you make of the role of music in Elisha's prophecy (II Kings 3:15)?

II Kings chapters 4-6 – “The Miracles of Elisha”

Elisha is now the leading prophetic figure in Israel. He had asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit and it appears that this is what he has. He performs a series of miracles including the healing of Naaman, the commander of the king of Aram. Yet Israel itself, failing to repent, falls more and more into despair. Nonetheless the Word of the Lord and its power remains.

IV. Feeding and Healing – chapter 4

Israel remains in a precarious position spiritually. Idolatry still exists. As noted, while King Jehoram was not as corrupt as his parents, Ahab and Jezebel, he still continues in sin (II Kings 3:2-3). Elisha's role in these chapters is strikingly similar to Jesus' earthly ministry. There are some notable parallels. In Jesus' time the idolatry of Baal had been replaced by the idolatry of Rome which was then deifying its emperors. The Pharisees and priests, for all their religious strictness, had lost any sense of true faith and in many ways were complicit in the idolatry of Rome (John 19:15).

In this context Jesus went about healing people in need including even servants of Roman Centurions (Matthew 8:5-13). Elisha does the same. In response to the need of a widow of one of the prophets who can't pay her debtors Elisha instructs her to pour the one jar of oil she has into empty vessels. She is told to borrow these from her neighbors and “not just a few” (II Kings 4:3). The oil from the single jar fills all the vessels until there are no more to be filled. Elisha then tells the woman to sell the oil and pay her debts (II Kings 4:1-7).

We next read of a double miracle which echoes an earlier miracle of Elijah's (I Kings 17:17-24). The first part of this miracle has Elisha prophesying that a Shunammite woman who had provided him with hospitality would give birth despite the fact that “her husband was old.” Sometime later though the child complains of a head ache and dies. The woman in bitter distress seeks out Elisha. The prophet initially offers her his staff to be put on the face of the child. The woman, however, insists that Elisha himself accompany her. Elisha agrees to go with her. As was the case with Elijah, he lays on top of the boy and he comes back to life (II Kings 4:11-37).

There follows two miracles related to food. One has to do with food that had been contaminated and the other with an inadequate supply of food which miraculously multiplies leaving some left over. Again, one is struck by the way this foreshadows Jesus' miracle of the feeding of the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish (John 6:1-14).

V. The Healing of Naaman – chapter 5

It is important in this account to remember that Naaman is a commander in the army of Aram. The Aramites are Israel's chief enemies at this time. Again there is the parallel

to Jesus healing the Centurion's servant in the New Testament. It is significant to note in passing the statement that the Lord had given victory to Aram (II Kings 5:1). This shows that God does not automatically favor Israel especially Israel in its unfaithfulness.

Naaman is suffering from leprosy which in that time was a death sentence. A young girl who had been taken captive in the war with Israel tells Naaman of the prophet Elisha. In spite of the political difficulties which this conjures up, Naaman asks the king of Aram for permission to go to the king of Israel, with gifts no less, to ask for healing. The king of Israel, presumably Jehoram, is horrified at the request. He suspects that the real purpose behind the request is to provoke "a quarrel," leading no doubt once again to a war (II Kings 5:4-7).

Elisha however intervenes and sends a message to Naaman that he is to wash himself seven times (the number of perfection) in the Jordan River. For Naaman however this apparently sounds too simple. He protests that he has his own rivers in Aram. His servants however point out that if he had been asked something much more difficult he would have done that. They say, in effect, why not try it. Of course Naaman complies with the instruction of Elisha and is healed (II Kings 5:8-14). The point of the story is that God does not need to act in some dramatic or stunning fashion. Often God works miracles through simple, ordinary things. Because these things are simple and ordinary we can well disregard them. It is important to see God's presence in the little things.

Naaman of course is more than grateful that he has been healed. First of all he recognizes that the God of Israel alone is the true God (II Kings 5:15). He offers to give presents to Elisha which the prophet declines (II Kings 5:16). Naaman next makes an interesting request. He asks to be pardoned if he has to accompany his master into the worship of the false god, Rimmon. Elisha tells him to "go in peace" (II Kings 5:18-19). This raises the intriguing prospect that it is not so much the object of worship that is crucial but rather the attitude of the heart. This opens up the theme of other religions or what Paul describes in Romans 2 as the Gentiles who will be saved because they patiently do good and seek for glory, honor and immortality (Romans 2:6-7).

This story ends on a warning note as Elisha's servant becomes greedy and follows Naaman, lying that he is bringing a request from Elisha. Naaman, of course, is prepared to be more than generous. However, when Elisha learns of the deception of his servant he places the leprosy of Naaman on him (II Kings 5:25-27). Corruption in religious circles is hardly new.

VI. Seeing the Chariots – chapter 6

This chapter opens with a somewhat strange story regarding the company of prophets who are trying to build new accommodations for themselves. One of them (prophets then as now perhaps not being too handy) loses his ax handle, which had been borrowed, in the water. Elisha throws a stick in the place where the ax handle was lost and the axe handle floats to the surface. Again this is a miracle in a small matter. We

should not be afraid to pray for finding lost keys or anything else that is ordinary and mundane. God is the Lord even of lost tools (II Kings 6:1-7).

The next scene is one of the most dramatic in the Old Testament. The Arameans are concerned that their secrets are known. In response to the king's inquiry he is told that Elisha is the one who passes on his private sayings. The king then sends an army to bring Elisha in. The army surrounds the city where Elisha is. At dawn, one of Elisha's servants looks out and sees the surrounding army. "Alas, Master! What shall we do?" he calls out to Elisha. Elisha responds, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." Elisha then prays to God that the servant's eyes may be opened to the spiritual realities around them. The servant then sees that the mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire. In response to Elisha's prayer the army is struck blind. Elisha then leads them into Samaria where the king wants to kill them. Elisha instead instructs the king to prepare a feast for them and send them home. This gracious act leads to the end of at least this phase of the conflict (II Kings 6:8-23). The great point of this story is that too often we only see the physical opposition that confronts us. We don't realize or appreciate the spiritual support that surrounds us. The same chariots of fire that took Elijah to heaven still surround us. We have no reason to fear: "for there are more with us than there are with them" (II Kings 6:16).

This chapter ends on a despairing note. Once again the Arameans are attacking Israel. The famine has become so great that people are eating their children! The king oddly enough blames Elisha for the tragedy. He sends a messenger to kill Elisha. Finally the king comes himself and cries out, "This trouble is from the Lord! Why should I hope in the Lord any longer?" (II Kings 6:32-33). The trouble from the Lord may well be a judgment calling us back to him. In any event the king has not been hoping in the Lord so his lament has a hollow ring. Elisha stands alone on the Word of God. We can do no less.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What can we learn from the miracles of Elisha? What comfort can we take from God's doing everything from raising the dead to locating a lost axe handle?
2. Why is Naaman so incensed by the simple request to wash in the Jordan River? What does it mean for us to recognize God's power in the ordinary, unspectacular things?
3. What do we fear? How can God open our eyes to see the heavenly chariots of fire surrounding us?

II Kings chapters 7-9 – “Judgment on False Kings and Queens”

In these chapters God takes an active hand in correcting the multiple abuses of the kings of both Israel and Judah. He continues to work through Elisha as his spokesperson. In spite of the failings of the southern kingdom of Judah, God will not abandon it because of the promise he made to David (II Kings 8:19).

VII. The Arameans Flee – chapter 7

Israel (Samaria) is in the midst of a terrible siege by the Arameans. People are literally starving (and as we saw in chapter 6 cannibalizing their own children!). The King has given up. In the midst of this desperate situation Elisha makes a prediction that the very next day there will be an abundance of food and it will be sold very cheaply (one shekel, the basic unit of currency, seven shekels were roughly equivalent to a day's pay for an unskilled worker). The captain of the king's army dismisses this prophecy as being impossible. Elisha then prophesies that the captain will see this but will not eat from it. In other words he will die.

We then have the intriguing story of four lepers who decide to go into the camp of the Aramean Army. Since the city of Samaria was undergoing starvation their basic attitude is, what can we lose? To their amazement they find the camp deserted. The Lord had caused the Arameans to believe that they were about to run over by armies of the Hittites and the Egyptians and so they fled in a virtual panic leaving all their food and supplies behind them.

The lepers eagerly help themselves to food, clothing and jewels (II Kings 7:8). They however become convicted at not sharing their good fortune and so they come to tell the gatekeepers of the city. The news is then passed on to the king who believes it's a trick of the Aramean to lure the Israelites out of the city. On further inspection it becomes obvious that the Arameans have indeed fled and have left a great deal of food and supplies behind them (II Kings 7:15). The result is that the prophecy of Elisha comes true. The food is sold for no more than a shekel (II Kings 7:16). The king's captain however who had expressed doubt is trampled to death in the gate also in fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy (II Kings 7:17, 20).

Again this seems overly harsh to us (Doubting Thomas was hardly trampled to death by the other disciples!). We need however to remember that Elisha and his followers are a tiny, threatened minority in a completely idolatrous and indeed cruel world. Whether it is mocking children or a disbelieving captain the power of the Word of God is being established. Paul reminds us, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow (Galatians 6:7).

VIII. The Decline Deepens – chapter 8

The chronology of the next event is not entirely clear. This appears to be a sequel to the story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman. Elisha warns the woman of an impending seven year famine (II Kings 8:1). The number may well be symbolic (seven=perfection). After the famine the woman returns seeking to reclaim her house and land which seem to have fallen into the hands of the king (for non-payment of taxes during the seven years?). The king asks Gehazi the servant of Elisha about the prophet. Gehazi tells how the woman's son was restored to life by Elisha. The king himself questions the woman and restores her property. This whole story seems to have taken us back to an earlier account. The king does not know who Elisha is and the servant Gehazi was last seen suffering from leprosy for having deceived Elisha (II Kings 5:25-27). This then seems to refer to earlier events.

We now see Elisha playing a more central role than being a prophet in Israel. He journeys to Damascus where the king is ill. The king sends his servant Hazael to inquire of Elisha if he will be restored to health. In a puzzling response Elisha sends a false word back to the king saying he will be healed when in reality he won't be (II Kings 8:10). Elisha weeps over his next prophecy. He sees Hazael as succeeding to the throne of Aram and leading a devastating campaign against Israel (II Kings 8:11-13). God's word to the king is really a lie. Why does God do this?

This entire chapter records the actions of faithless kings. That would certainly apply to Ben-hadad. It also applies not only to Joram, the king of Israel (II Kings 3:2) but also to the kings of Judah, first Jehoram, son of King Jehoshaphat and his son, Ahaziah. All of these kings are corrupt (II Kings 8:18, 27). There is constant warfare, not only with Aram but also with Edom (II Kings 8:20-24). King Joram is wounded in the war against the Arameans (II Kings 8:29). What is the point of all this and why the deceptive word to Ben-hadad?

God bears with the sins of Judah because of his promise to David (II Kings 8:19). Yet God owes Judah nothing. The same can be said of Israel and also of the Arameans. God is preparing judgment on this endless cycle of idolatry and corruption. This is not the first time God has sent a "lying spirit" as a form of judgment (I Kings 22:20-23). God is under no obligation to deal truthfully with those whose idolatrous and cruel ways are nothing less than expressions of falsehood. In the next chapter we see God carrying out his judgment

IX. The Anointing of Jehu – chapter 9

There is another son of the former king of Judah, Jehoshaphat. This son is Jehu. Elisha now sends a young prophet to anoint Jehu as king over Israel. The corruption of Ahab has now penetrated to both kingdoms. Joram (Jehoram), son of Ahab continues the corrupt line of Israel (II Kings 3:2-3) while Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat reigns in Judah married to Ahab's daughter (II Kings 8:18). This makes the two kings with the same name also brothers-in-law. This is to say that the family of Ahab and Jezebel has taken over both kingdoms, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern

kingdom). God would certainly have been justified in destroying both kingdoms at this point. However he will not abandon either (Jeremiah 51:5).

Jehu is anointed in effect to be the restorer of Israel. In order for that to happen the house of Ahab has to be completely destroyed. Jehu will accomplish that mission. The young prophet anoints Jehu in private (II Kings 9:6). When Jehu is asked by the other army commanders what is happening he dismisses it initially. However they press him and when he tells them the news they all proclaim him king (II Kings 9:11-13).

Jehu marches out. His goal is to overthrow both corrupt kings, Joram and Ahaziah. Joram is recuperating from his wounds in Jezreel. Hearing of the coming of Jehu with armed troops he sends out a messenger asking if Jehu comes in peace. Jehu responds with the question, "What have you to do with peace? Fall in behind me" (II Kings 9:17-18). This happens twice. The messengers do not return. The sentinel who reports this then adds that Jehu is approaching driving like a maniac (II Kings 9:20).

King Ahaziah of Judah is visiting the afflicted Joram. At this point both kings go out to meet Jehu. Again Joram asks if Jehu comes in peace. Jehu responds, how can there be peace where the corruption of his mother Jezebel continues? (II Kings 9:22). Joram calls out to Ahaziah that they are now confronted with treason. It is too late. Jehu proceeds to have both kings killed. The body of Joram is thrown out on the ground that had belonged to Naboth whose vineyard Jezebel and Ahab had stolen (II Kings 9:23-29).

The final judgment is against Jezebel herself. Hearing that Jehu is coming for her she makes herself appear enticing. She leans out her window and asks Jehu if he comes in peace and also calls him a murderer for having killed her son. Jehu calls out, "Who is my side?" Several eunuchs, apparently servants of Jezebel, respond and Jehu tells them to "throw her down." Her blood splatters the walls and she is trampled by Jehu's horses. He goes in to eat and drink and then gives orders to have her buried. Yet all that is left of her is her skull and her feet and the palm of her hands. The dogs have eaten her as Elijah had prophesied (II Kings 9:30-37).

The memory of Jezebel as one of the most deadly figures in Israel's history lives on (Revelation 3:19-23). She symbolizes the image of the Fatal Woman whether in the form of ancient goddesses like Asherah (I Kings 15:13) and Artemis of the Ephesians (Acts 19:23-31) or the followers of these cults (Numbers 25:1-9) or temptresses like Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:1-18). Finally she is the goddess Cybele, the Great Mother of Rome whom the early Christians renamed the Great Whore (Revelation 17). This figure has at various times been overestimated or underestimated and the misuse of this theme certainly has contributed to the marginalization of women in general. Yet she must be taken seriously without the overreaction of earlier figures like Tertulian or Augustine who ended up teaching that all sex is evil.

Jehu now is the new King of Israel.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What do you make of the disbelieving captain in chapter 7? Why do you think he suffers such a terrible punishment (II Kings 7:2, 17-19)? Is there a difference between doubt and defiance (Matthew 28:17)?
2. Why do you think God tells Elisha to deceive King Ben-hadad? What is the role of a “deceiving spirit?” (I Kings 22:22-23; cf. II Corinthians 12:7)?
3. Are there times when peace is not appropriate? How can we discern those times?

II Kings chapters 10-12 – “The Purging of Israel”

This is one of the bloodiest accounts in Scripture. Under the leadership of Jehu, we see a fearful purging of all of Israel, both Samaria and Judah. Jehu, having led a rebellion and killed both kings and the deadly Queen Jezebel, now turns to the destruction of all of Ahab’s family. Yet none of this leads to real reform. The darkness described in these chapters is unmatched in Scripture (Psalm 14:2-3). In chapters like these we see the impotence of the law to effect real spiritual change. We have to await the message of the prophets leading up to the coming of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:3-4).

X. “Come in and kill them; let no one escape” (II Kings 10:25) – chapter 10

Jehu, having been anointed king and having executed judgment on Jezebel and both King Joram of Israel and King Ahaziah of Judah now turns to all the descendents of Ahab. Ahab has seventy sons! This is not remarkable given the number of wives and concubines that many leaders in Israel had. The name “seventy” may be an approximation based on the number “seven,” signifying completeness or perfection. Gideon for example is listed as having had seventy sons because he had many wives (Judges 8:30).

Jehu writes to the rulers of Jezreel, to the elders and to the guardians of the sons (daughters are not mentioned). Jehu asks for nothing less than the heads of all the sons. He instructs the rulers to send him the heads in a basket! (II Kings 10:7). This is presented as a fulfillment of the Word of the Lord spoken to Elijah that Ahab’s house would have no survivors (II Kings 10:10-11).

His bloody campaign continues. Jehu orders the slaughter of all the relatives of Ahaziah (II Kings 10:12-14). Jehu then links up with Jehonadab who may well have been a leader of a reform group in Israel. Together they plot the destruction all the priests of the false god, Baal. He invites all the worshippers of Baal into their temple on the pretense of offering a special sacrifice to Baal. Once inside, he has all of them killed. The pillar of Baal inside the temple is destroyed. Nothing is left. The worship of Baal in Israel is effectively terminated.

Does this then lead to a happy ending? Hardly! Jehu having done well in destroying the worship of Baal now turns to other idols, specifically the golden calves which Jeroboam had reinstated. The tragedy is that Jehu does not follow the law of God with all his heart (II Kings 10:31). Does all the bloodshed of Jehu accomplish anything ultimately? Apparently not. God proceeds to take away some of the land of Israel. Hazael, the king of Aram, returns to defeat Israel. Jehu dies after having reigned in Samaria for twenty eight years.

There are a number of lessons to be learned here. There is a danger in focusing on the false gods of whatever time. It’s too easy to destroy one false god and then fall into the

trap of another. Yet, these gods need to be confronted and exposed (Colossians 2:8; Ephesians 6:10-17). The critical issue is how our heart is turned toward God. Jehu is zealous for the Lord, but in the final analysis his heart turns away from the Lord.

The cycle of bloodshed is finally ineffective. In the New Testament Jesus calls a contemporary Jezebel to repent. If she or her followers fail to do so Jesus will strike them dead (Revelation 2:23). Yet in Jesus there is repentance. This is the difference between Jehu and Jesus. Does Jehu fall into pride? We don't know. Jesus gives us the example of a heart turned to do God's will even when we want to turn away (Mark 14:36).

XI. The Reform of Jehoiada – chapters 11-12

Following the death of Jehu Israel enters a period of anarchy. Into this situation Athaliah, the mother of King Ahaziah of Judah and the daughter of the notorious King Ahab, seizes the throne. Her plans are no less ruthless than her predecessors. She proceeds to kill all the royal family so that she has no rivals for her throne. She is even prepared to murder her baby grandson, Joash. However Jehosheba, King Joram's daughter (by another woman, not Athaliah), manages to hide him from Athaliah (Joram was the son of King Ahab of Israel. Athaliah was the wife of another Joram, the son of King Jehoshaphat of Judah).

The story of a hidden prince is a familiar one throughout history. He is guarded over by the priest Jehoiada. After seven years, Jehoiada summons all the captains of the guards and forms a covenant with them. He then introduces them to Joash who has been tutored by Jehoiada and is only seven years old. Yet he is the rightful heir to the throne and more importantly is the Lord's choice. Jehoiada arranges for careful protection of the young prince and then has him crowned king (II Kings 11:9-12). When Athaliah hears of this she cries out, "Treason! Treason!" Jehoiada then commands the captains of the army to bring her out and kill her. They do not want to kill her in the temple where the young king is being crowned, so they drag her into the palace and kill her there. Following this, Jehoiada leads an effort to tear down the temple of Baal whose worship had been supported by Athaliah (II Kings 8:18). The priest of Baal is executed (II Kings 11:18). The seven year old Jehoash is confirmed as king (II Kings 11:19-21).

Jehoash reigns forty years in Jerusalem. Under the guidance of the priest Jehoiada, King Joash does what is right in the sight of the Lord (II Kings 12:1-2). Yet, there is a fatal flaw in his reign. The ancient idolatrous poles, the "high places," are not taken down (II Kings 12:3).

The corruption is not immediately apparent. Joash leads a major effort to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. He encourages the priests to take whatever money they collect in taxes and donations to be used for the rebuilding effort. This is still being overseen by the priest Jehoiada. This money, which grows to be a considerable amount, is kept separate from guilt offerings and sin offerings which are given to the priests to maintain

the ongoing worship in the temple (II Kings 12:9-16). So much is raised that when the old adversary King Hazael of Aram threatens to attack again, Joash has enough money from “the treasures of the Lord” to buy him off and he withdraws (II Kings 12:17-18).

We next have a brief description of Joash’s death. He is assassinated by his own servants. The writer of the Book of Kings gives us no motive for this. However, according to the parallel account in II Chronicles 24:17-27, following the death of his priest and guide Jehoiada, Joash falls into the idolatry which he had previously allowed to continue. He is opposed by Jehoiada’s son Zechariah. Joash orders his death, forgetting in effect all that Zechariah’s father Jehoiada had done for him. According to this fuller version, Joash is wounded in a battle with a smaller army from Aram because the hand of the Lord has been removed from him due to his rejection of the Lord. According to this account his servants kill him to avenge the death of Zechariah. Jesus himself later refers to this event (Matthew 23:34-35).

What are we to make of all this? Several things are evident. The events recorded in these chapters are only intelligible in the larger context of God’s plan of election particularly spelled out with regard to Israel in Romans 9-11. What we read of this period represents a pattern no different from the nations surrounding Israel such as Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. What does it mean for Israel to be the chosen people of God when their behavior was no different from the other nations? We are left with Paul’s hopeful statement, “For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29) as well as the promise of Jeremiah 51:5. Yet these promises are no ground for complacency much less sin. God judges his chosen servant David as well as all Israel.

A sober warning here is the toleration of idolatry in Israel which finally rises up and destroys one king after another beginning with Solomon. We have to ask what forms does idolatry take in our own time (Paul mentions greed as one example, Ephesian 5:5). Paul presents a threefold view which may guide us. First, everything in the created order is good. Everything has its proper role provided it is received with thanksgiving (I Timothy 4:4). Second, Paul speaks of a mature freedom in Christ which recognizes that an idol has no real existence (I Corinthians 8:4). His only concern here is the possibility of troubling the conscience of weaker believers who may not understand and appreciate this freedom (this is different from placating the prejudices of other so-called mature believers (Acts 15:1) . Finally, Paul warns against actually participating in the worship of idols (I Corinthians 10:14-22). He concludes with the statement, “All things are lawful, but not all things build up” (I Corinthians 10:23). We live in that tension.

Questions for Us –

1. What are we to make of this bloody history? What is the Holy Spirit teaching us through these chapters?
2. Why do you think the worship of idols is so pervasive? What are some of the idols of our time?

3. We are struck by the contrast between Jehu who did not follow God with all his heart (II Ki 10:31) and David who was a man after God's own heart (I Samuel 13:14). How can our hearts turned more to the Lord?

II Kings chapters 13-15 – “Israel’s Nevertheless vs. God’s Nevertheless”

This is a distressing part of Scripture. We see a seemingly endless cycle of idolatry, violence, betrayal, civil war and murder. What possible lessons can we learn from a passage like this? We see the astonishing faithfulness of God in the midst of incredible human sin.

- I. We need a scorecard – a list of the Kings of Israel and Judah
 - a. The Kings of Israel
 - i. Jehoahaz, son of Jehu – reigns seventeen years – does “evil in the sight of the Lord” – II Kings 13:1-2
 - ii. Jehoash, son of Jehoahaz – reigns sixteen years – does evil
 - iii. Jeroboam, son of Jehoash – reigns 41 years – does evil
 - iv. Zechariah, son of Jeroboam – reigns 6 months – does evil – is assassinated by Shallum – II Kings 15:8-10
 - v. Shallum, son of Jabesh – reigns one month – assassinated by Menahem, son of Gadi – II Kings 15:13-14
 - vi. Menahem – reigns 10 years – does evil – sacks Tiphsah – II Kings 15:16-22
 - vii. Pekahiah, son of Menahem – reigns two years – does evil – assassinated by Pekah, son of Remaliah – II Kings 15:23-25
 - viii. Pekah – reigns 20 years – does evil – was assassinated by Hoshea, son of Elah – II Kings 15:27-31
 - b. The Kings of Judah
 - i. Joash – reigns 40 years – does what is right but maintains the “high places” – Asherah poles – II Kings 12:1-3; cf. Jeremiah 7:8-20; 13:27
 - ii. Amaziah, son of Joash reigns 29 years – does what is right except the high places – kills the servants who had murdered his father – II Kings 14:1-6 – assassinated in Lachis by unknown persons – II Kings 14:17-20
 - iii. Azariah, son of Amaziah – reigns 52 years – does what is right except for the high places – God strikes him with leprosy – II Kings 15:1-7
 - iv. Jotham, son of Azariah (Uzziah) – reigns 16 years – does what is right except for the high places – II Kings 15:32-38

II. A Brief Civil War – 14:8-14

For some reason Amaziah, king of Judah wants to provoke a war with King Jehoash of Israel. Jehoash tries to persuade him to abandon the idea. Amaziah does not listen and leads his troops into battle with the forces of Israel. Judah is soundly defeated and Jehoash invades Jerusalem and takes all the gold and silver from both the temple and the king’s house.

III. So Do We Learn Anything Here?

The apostle Paul reminds us that “these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did” and these were written down “to instruct us” (I Corinthians 10:6-13). There are in fact three basic lessons to be learned from these rather alarming chapters.

- a. The prophet of Elisha is dead. He was the successor to Elijah. Yet we do not read of a successor to Elisha. We can only conclude that there was no prophet in Israel or Judah at this time. There was no Word of the Lord. Faith is lacking. King Joash of Israel visits Elisha on his deathbed. Elisha instructs him to strike the ground with what he calls “The Lord’s arrow of victory.” The king only strikes the ground three times. Elisha is angry that he did not continue. The striking of the arrows indicates how many times Israel will defeat their enemies, the Arameans. Because the king only strikes the ground three times he will only have three victories over Aram. That is not enough to win the war (II Kings 13:14-19).

We have a sense of the power of Elisha when, after he is dead, another corpse is thrown into his grave. As soon as the dead man touches the bones of Elisha he comes back to life! (II Kings 13:20-21). The lesson here is that no group, including even God’s chosen people, can survive without depending on the Word of God. This dependency requires work, study and interpretation (John 5:39; II Timothy 2:15).

- b. Left to themselves human beings desire darkness rather than light (John 3:19; Psalm 14:2-3). If these are the chosen people of God, the ones who received God’s law, whose prophets announced the Word of God from Moses to Elisha, why should we be surprised at any of the atrocities of history? There is a clear difference between wanting to hear positive things and a willingness to hear the truth as painful as it is. Greek tragedy is full of violence and revenge. So are the plays of Shakespeare. This is the world in its sin. Jesus’ ministry is carried out under the brutality of Herod and Pilate (not to mention the emperors of Rome) and he dies a cruel and unjust death on the cross. Anything less would not be true to the world as it presently exists.
- c. The greater truth is the grace of God. Throughout these stormy chapters we read of God’s faithfulness. The Lord remains gracious to Israel (II Kings 13:23). The Lord will not blot out the name of Israel. He will continue to save them (II Kings 14:27). We can see this as God’s pattern. Judgment is real but it is always followed by mercy (James 2:13). We can never presume on God’s mercy. Yet we can always pray for it and trust in it. God’s “Nevertheless” ultimately cancels out the “nevertheless” of Israel and Judah’s idolatries.

“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all”
(Romans 11:32).

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think even the so-called good kings of Judah tolerate the “high places?” What would be an example of that today?
2. Why do we not read of a successor to Elisha as a prophet?
3. The Reformed view of the Biblical theme of sin has led many to the hope of a “universal salvation.” John Calvin writes, “In conclusion, he (Paul) is showing that God has at heart the salvation of all men, for He calls all men to acknowledge His truth.” The second Helvetic Confession (1561) adds, “. . . yet we must hope well of all, and not rashly judge any man to be a reprobate.” How does this hope both challenge and inspire us?

II Kings chapters 16-19– “The End of Israel and the Hope of Judah”

“For a moment I believed that the destruction of Sennacherib had been repeated – that God had repented, that the Angel of Death had slain them in the night.” – H.G. Wells
The War of the Worlds

In these chapters, the fates of Israel and Judah represent two different extremes. Israel descends deeper and deeper into idolatry and faithlessness until there is no turning back and the Assyrians take them into captivity. Israel then, the northern kingdom, is no more. It becomes the Samaria that is so reviled by the Jews of the New Testament. On the other hand, the righteous King Hezekiah of Judah trusts in the Lord and the Lord delivers him and his land. There is no middle ground here.

I. “they neither listened nor obeyed” (II Kings 18:12) – chapters II Kings 16-17

At the beginning of this section the southern kingdom of Judah has descended into corruption even worse than that of the time of Ahab and Jezebel. King Ahab represents an all time low for Judah. In general, as we have seen, the kings of Judah at least attempted to do what was right yet they tolerated the idolatrous practices of the “high places” (II Kings 15:3-4, II Kings 34-35). What we see here is the net result of a long term pattern of tolerating behavior that rejects the one true God. We are not told that these kings themselves worshipped at the high places but nonetheless they tolerated the practice. This leads finally to the degenerate practices of Ahaz.

Ahaz not only worships pagan gods but he goes to the full extreme of sacrificing his son (II Kings 16:3). Ahaz ends up in a war against King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah of Israel. He sends to the king of Assyria for help (II Kings 16:5-9). In a parallel account in the Book of Isaiah, Ahaz is told by Isaiah that God will deliver him. This prophecy includes the famous promise of the child who will be Immanuel, God-with-us (Isaiah 7:1-14). Ahaz, however, does not trust in the Lord but instead seeks an alliance with King Tiglath-pileser. He receives support in the short run. The king of Assyria kills King Rezin (II Kings 16:9). This however will have serious consequences for the future.

As if this isn't bad enough, when King Ahaz goes to visit Tiglath-pileser in Damascus he is very impressed with the altar he sees there. He has the altar duplicated and placed in the temple in Jerusalem. To fit it in he has to remove some of the interior of the temple itself (II Kings 16:10-20). We're told he did this “because of the king of Assyria” (II Kings 16:18). Was he trying to impress the king? Was some of this intended to pay back Tiglath-pileser for his support? We're not sure. It would seem that Ahaz is introducing idols into the temple itself. The depressing record of the decline of the kings continues. However, as we will see, the decline does not go on indefinitely.

The next king of the northern kingdom of Samaria is Hoshea. He is threatened by the next king of Assyria. Hoshea pretends to support this king. However, he secretly sends

to Egypt for aid. He is found out and captured. The king of Assyria invades the northern kingdom of Israel, conquers it and takes the people into captivity. This is the end of the northern kingdom, Israel.

The writer reminds us, as we have been shown throughout this history that the people of Israel have turned away from the Lord again and again. This then is God's judgment (II Kings 17:7-18). Even in exile Israel has a king. In this case it is Jeroboam son of Nebat. He however only leads Israel into "great sin." Therefore we now witness the end of the land of Israel. It is however not the end of the people of Israel (as we remember promises like Jeremiah 51:5).

The king of Assyria seeks to repopulate the land with other peoples. They bring in their idols and God responds by sending lions among them (II Kings 17:24-26). The king then sends for a priest to come and teach the new inhabitants how they should worship the Lord (II Kings 17:27-28). This, however, doesn't prevent the idolatrous practices from being followed. The final picture of what becomes Samaria (and no longer Israel) is an unhealthy synthesis of the worship of false gods alongside the true God. The writer reminds us that this is a violation of the first two commandments. As was the case in the time of Elijah the people vacillate between two different views (I Kings 16:21). The people don't listen to the Word of God and follow their own "customs" (II Kings 17:40-41).

II. The Reforms of Hezekiah – chapters 18-19

Hezekiah comes to the throne in Judah. He is twenty five years old and he reigns for twenty nine years. Hezekiah thankfully is not like any of his predecessors. He carries out a complete reform in Judah and Jerusalem. He removes all of the idols including the high places. He even does away with the bronze serpent Moses had lifted up in the wilderness since by this time it had become an idol (II Kings 18:3-4; Numbers 21:4-9). This bronze serpent later is a symbol of Christ (John 3:14-15). This is an important lesson since it shows that even a sacred object can become an idol. Nothing can take the place of the Lord.

Hezekiah is threatened by the great king of Assyria Sennacherib. Apparently at this point Judah was paying tribute to Assyria to avoid the fate of the northern kingdom. Hezekiah rebels against this (II Kings 18:7). As a consequence Judah is attacked. Hezekiah admits to doing wrong (18:14). In order to make up for the tribute he takes gold and silver from the temple itself (II Kings 18:15-16). This however is not enough. The king sends envoys to Jerusalem basically demanding total surrender. The messenger from Sennacherib mocks the confidence of Hezekiah in the Lord. He even claims that the Lord has sent the Assyrians to destroy Jerusalem (II Kings 18:25). The messenger (Rabshakeh) paints a dire picture of the fate of Jerusalem which the people on the wall of the city can hear (II Kings 18:26-27). Speaking in the "language of Judah" he presents a final mocking challenge stating that the gods of other people could not deliver them from the Assyrians and therefore not even the Lord will be able to deliver Jerusalem (II Kings 18:35).

Hezekiah had instructed his messengers not to respond to the challenge of the Assyrians. They return to him with the message of the threat having torn their clothes. Hezekiah himself tears his clothes (II Kings 19:1). They go to the prophet Isaiah who gives a word of hope from the Lord. They are not to be afraid of the Assyrians (II Kings 19:5-7). The king sends a message to Hezekiah repeating his threat with his defiant statement that Hezekiah's God will not be able to deliver him from the might of Assyria (II Kings 19:8-13).

Hezekiah brings the letter into the temple and spreads it before the Lord. He prays earnestly for the deliverance of Jerusalem (II Kings 19:15-19). The prophet Isaiah responds with a defiant word from the Lord. God will judge Sennacherib for his arrogance. He will snatch him like a fish putting a hook in his nose and a bit in his mouth (II Kings 19:20-28). God's final word is

“For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David” (II Kings 19:34).

That very night the angel of the Lord strikes the Assyrian army dead. Sennacherib returns to his own country only to be killed by his own sons as he is worshipping a false god. His defiance of the true God has been answered forever.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.” (Psalm 46:1-2).

Questions for Us –

1. What can we learn from the contrasting fates of Israel and Judah?
2. What does Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent tell us about the nature of idolatry?
3. Hezekiah's faith in the Lord is vindicated by the destruction of the Assyrian army? How have you experienced the deliverance of the Lord in your own life?

II Kings chapters 20-22– “Double Paths”

In these three chapters we see two very different paths being taken even by the same figures. Hezekiah, the first truly good king since David, indulges in an act of pride which will have serious consequences. Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, is one of the worst kings and his son, Josiah, one of the best. Yet in all this, God's extended patience with Judah and Jerusalem is running out.

I. Hezekiah's Pride –chapter 20

These events are also repeated in the Book of Isaiah, chapters 38 and 39. In this chapter we see Hezekiah himself taking a “double path.” The scene begins with Hezekiah becoming seriously ill and Isaiah informing him that he will soon die. Hezekiah then in an act of faith implores the Lord to spare him (II Kings 20:2-3). God hears his prayer and promises him fifteen more years of life adding also the promise of deliverance from Judah's current enemy, the Assyrians (II Kings 20:5-6). Hezekiah, being human, wants some kind of guarantee of God's promise. The sign that Hezekiah is given is basically the sun going backwards (or at least its appearance of going backward as in “the sun is rising”). Nothing suggests that this request for a sign was out of place (cf. Matthew 12:39).

The next scene however shows Hezekiah in a different light. Several envoys from the newly emergent world power Babylon come to visit Hezekiah with letters and a present having heard that he has been sick (II Kings 20:12). Hezekiah not only welcomes them but proceeds to show them all his wealth. Indeed we are told “there was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.” What was he thinking? In effect he was inviting the Babylonians to raid his kingdom. Isaiah confronts him with his foolish move. Isaiah then adds the prophecy that the day is coming when all of Jerusalem will be carried off to Babylon including Hezekiah's own descendents (II Kings 20:17-18). Hezekiah speaks positively of the prophecy and then thinks to himself that it won't happen in his life time so, in effect, he doesn't care. Needless to say, this leaves Hezekiah in a bad light. He seems remarkably callous and unconcerned. Before we judge him too harshly we need to examine ourselves. Some people's attitudes to contemporary issues like climate change can be similar. “It won't happen in my lifetime” (although we're seeing this more and more right before us).

Hezekiah dies and is buried with his ancestors. He is succeeded by his son Manasseh who is only twelve years old. He reigns fifty five years and is very different from his father.

II. The Apostasy of Manasseh – chapter 21

Manasseh basically undoes all the reforms of his father. He leads Judah into an unprecedented (for Judah at least) descent into idolatry including sorcery and child sacrifice (II Kings 21:6). Manasseh's example leads Judah into worse behavior than

even that of the nations which God had driven out in judgment before Israel. We are left with the question, does anything remain of the promises to Abraham or David? The “blessing of the nations” appears to have disappeared concretely. All of this forms the background to Paul’s comments in Romans regarding the unfaithfulness of Israel (“Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”). Paul’s answer here as in his more extended discussion in Romans chapters 9-11 is a resounding “By no means!” (Romans 3:4).

Yet it is during the reign of Manasseh that God announces his judgment on Judah (II Kings 21:10-13). God will give them over to their enemies (II Kings 21:14). They will go into exile in Babylon. God adds the comment that Israel has provoked him to anger since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt (II Kings 21:15)! Why then has God put up with them all this time? Paul again gives the answer, “For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

We have a somewhat different account of Manasseh in the parallel history in II Chronicles chapter 33. Here we read that Manasseh himself had been captured and brought in chains to Babylon. In captivity he repents and cries out to God. God hears him and restores him. Manasseh then leads his own reform overturning all the depravity which he previously had sponsored. The final comment is that the people still sacrificed on the high places but only to the true God (II Chronicles 33:17). The writer of Kings ignores, or perhaps did not know, of this hopeful end of Manasseh. Or perhaps he regards it as too little, too late since his son Amnon goes right back to doing evil (II Kings 21:19-21)

In any event Amnon reigns only two years because he is assassinated by his own servants. The servants themselves in turn are killed (II Kings 21:23-24). Yet in spite of this dismal record Amnon is followed by his eight year old son, Josiah, who will lead the greatest reform in Judah’s history. God is not done with them.

III. Josiah Finds the Book – chapter 22

Josiah initially is tutored by his mother Jedidah who presumably is faithful and guides young Josiah in following the Lord (II Kings 22:1-2). In the eighteenth year of Josiah’s reign when he would only have been twenty six years old he sends one of his servants to count the money that has been collected in the temple. The purpose of this action is hardly a selfish one. Josiah wants to use the funds to finance the repair of the temple. He doesn’t even ask for an accounting of the funds since he is confident that the workers are all honest (II Kings 22:5-7).

In the course of this repair work the high priest Hilkiah makes a remarkable discovery. He finds what is called “the book of the law” (II Kings 22:8). Most scholars believe this was the Book of Deuteronomy. We are then left with the disturbing conclusion that Judah in this time had been without any form of the Scriptures (II Chronicles 15:3). Isaiah refers to the scriptures at points but the general impression is that the people of

Israel had no clear instruction which partially at least may account for their frequent idolatry (cf. Isaiah 34:16).

Shaphan the secretary of the high priest reads the book aloud to Josiah. When Josiah hears it he tears his clothes (II Kings 22:11). He then instructs a delegation led by the high priest Hilkiah to go and inquire of the Lord (II Kings 22:13). They come to a prophetess, Huldah who announces an impending judgment on Judah and Jerusalem for their faithlessness and idolatry (II Kings 22:14-17). She adds however a special message for Josiah. In recognition of his response and his commitment to God's Word, he will not live to see the destruction that is coming. The devastation that will soon overtake Judah, Jerusalem and even the temple cannot be avoided because while Josiah can reform the temple he cannot reform the hearts of the people.
Stay tuned

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think that Hezekiah, after having been cured by the Lord, shows all of the wealth of Israel to the foreign envoys from Babylon? What do you make of his attitude that at least the judgment will not occur in his lifetime? How do we fall into these same attitudes?
2. Why do you think the author of Kings does not mention Manasseh's repentance and restoration (II Chronicles 33)? See also the Prayer of Manasseh in the Apocrypha.
3. Given the very significant role of the prophetess Huldah how can we account for the long standing historical prohibition against women in the ministry? What do historical examples like this say about how the scriptures are read?

II Kings chapters 23-25– “The Conclusion of the Books of Kings: Jerusalem on Fire”

The end now comes quickly. Josiah leads a massive reform in Jerusalem and for the first time since the period of the Judges the Passover is celebrated. Yet it is too little too late. Josiah's own son turns back to the idolatry of the past. God brings a final judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. The city and the temple are burnt to the ground and the people are taken away into slavery in Babylon.

IV. Josiah's Reforms –chapter 23

Having found the Book of the law (Deuteronomy) Josiah initiates a reform throughout Judah and Jerusalem. He instructs the priests to remove **from the temple (!)** all the traces of Baal and Asherah. He also removes all the priests who led and participated in the worship of these idols. The level of corruption is astonishing. It goes all the way back to Solomon (II Kings 23:13) and continued on up to the transgressions of his father Manasseh. Finally, the “high places” are torn down and destroyed. The altars on which children had been sacrificed are destroyed (II Kings 23:10). Josiah breaks down the houses of the male temple prostitutes and the priestess who served the fertility goddesses Asherah and Astarte (III Kings 23:7). He reforms the temple of Bethel. He preserves the tomb of the “man of God” who had warned Jeroboam of his apostasy but then had disobeyed God on his return home (I Kings 13). The priests of these cults are put to death (II Kings 23:20).

For the first time since the period of the Judges, the Passover is celebrated (II Kings 23:21-23). This seems astonishing, but without the scriptures the people of Israel had no guidance. They became worse than the unbelieving nations around them. Throughout history the people of God have been reformed by rediscovering the scriptures. This is the first example of that historical reality. Josiah also does away with the mediums and wizards in the land. Judah had not only become idolatrous. It had descended into the occult. No king had ever been as faithful as Josiah (II Kings 23:25).

Yet it was too little too late. God still plans to judge Jerusalem and Judah after the time of Josiah. Josiah's reforms will not last beyond his generation. His son, Jehoahaz will return to the depressing pattern of doing “evil in the sight of the Lord” (II Kings 23:31). Josiah later dies in battle with Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. According to the version in II Chronicles 35:20-27 the Pharaoh did not want to fight him, but Josiah went into battle anyway in disguise and was killed (II Kings 23:29).

Josiah's son Jehoahaz only reigns for three months and immediately goes back to the evil practices which Josiah tried so hard to eliminate (II Kings 23:31). He is taken captive by Pharaoh Neco and dies in Egypt (II Kings 23:33-34). The Pharaoh puts another son of Josiah, Eliakim, on the throne and changes his name to Jehoiakim. He reigns for eleven years (II Kings 23:36). Changing the name doesn't help much. He too goes back to the evil practices of his predecessors (II Kings 23:37).

V. The End of Jerusalem – chapters 24-25

Jehoiakim doesn't last long. He becomes a vassal of the King of Babylon whose empire has replaced that of Assyria and Egypt. Jehoiakim rebels against Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, and suffers the consequences. Jehoiakim dies and is replaced by his son Jehoiachin (try keeping him and his father's name straight!). Jehoiachin is only eighteen years old when he comes to the throne. He only lasts three months before Nebuchadnezzar comes in and sacks Judah and Jerusalem. Yet in that short time he turns to doing evil (II Kings 24:9). The Babylonians take out all the wealth found in the temple going back to the time of Solomon (II Kings 24:13). This is now God's judgment on faithless Judah just as the same fate had earlier fallen the northern kingdom of Israel and Samaria.

Jehoiachin is taken captive to Babylon. In his place essentially as a client king, Nebuchadnezzar appoints his twenty year old uncle, Mattaniah. Nebuchadnezzar changes his name to Zedekiah. He continues the same pattern of evil. Whatever repentance Manasseh went through and in spite of the reforms of Josiah, the pattern of disobedience and defiance has not changed.

Zedekiah rebels against Nebuchadnezzar with disastrous results. The Babylonians attack Jerusalem itself. Zedekiah tries to escape but is caught. His sons are killed before him. His eyes are put out and he is led in chains to Babylon (II Kings 25:1-7).

The final destruction of Jerusalem is given to the captain of the king's bodyguards, Nebuzaradan. Jerusalem with the temple and all its houses are set on fire and burnt to the ground. The people are led off into captivity in Babylon. Only the poorest people are left in the land (II Kings 25:8-12). Everything of value in the temple is taken out and sent on to Babylon (II Kings 25:13-17). The chief priest, other officials including sixty men who were found remaining in the city, are taken to the king of Babylon and executed (II Kings 25:18-21).

Nebuchadnezzar appoints a man named Gedaliah as his governor presiding over those who were left in the land. He cautions the survivors to serve the Babylonians as the key to their survival. Nonetheless he is assassinated and those who remain flee to Egypt (II Kings 25:26).

The cycle is now complete. Israel has not only returned to the bondage from which God delivered them in the Exodus. Some of them now have actually returned to Egypt. Jehoiachin is given special privileges in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar's son, Evil-merodach. The only hope here is that the line of David has not been completely snuffed out.

This is the end of the Book of Kings. However, it is not the end of Jerusalem or of Judah. Jeremiah who lives through this counsels the people,

"For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promises and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

Jeremiah adds,

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

This is not the end of the story. Indeed, it continues in the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Zechariah and others. God’s love is everlasting. God remains faithful even in the midst of human faithlessness (Jeremiah 31:3; II Timothy 2:13). The people will return. Jerusalem will be rebuilt. (Isaiah 59:20; Isaiah 62:1-12). Furthermore, there will be an eternal, heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-5).

The apostle Paul concludes the issue with these words, “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!” (Romans 11:1) and then later,

“And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

‘Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
He will banish ungodliness from Jacob.’

‘And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins’” (Romans 11:26-27).

“For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

Amen!

Questions for Us –

1. What lessons do you think God is teaching us through this whole account of David and the king Israel and Judah?
2. What do we learn about the justice of God in these books?
3. How do we interpret God’s judgment in the light of God’s love and mercy?