

2 Samuel-2 Kings: The Difference Leaders Make - Lesson 4.

2 Kings: Israel's Decline and Destruction.

I. Introduction: Attraction of Idolatry.

The book of 2 Kings is a book that follows directly after 1 Kings. Again, it is one of those situations where the division between the two is essentially for convenience. They really go together as a single book and in Jewish tradition, 1 and 2 Kings are together as a single book; that is the way they are described and understood.

Early on, we read about the Lord's judgment on a king named Ahaziah. The problem, as usual, is idolatry. In order to understand what happens in 2 Kings, it is useful to understand why it was that the Israelites kept turning to idols. Why was it that these people time after time, generation after generation, no matter what had happened, no matter what a prophet said or did, soon enough would revert right back to idolatry? What made idolatry so powerful in their thinking? What made these people soon, and sooner rather than later, get interested in becoming idol worshipers again? Why could not they stay with the Lord? From a human point of view, the answer is that the idolatry that they understood was a powerful attraction for them.

A. Provided a Guarantee.

Here is the way they thought of it: First of all, they thought of it as guaranteed. In their way of thinking, an idol guaranteed the presence of a god. If you could have that idol right there when you prayed, when you bowed down, when you kissed it and so on, that meant that the god was represented right there with you. It is a little like in modern times talking on the telephone. When we talk on the telephone, we say "I talked to so and so." Now what we really did was to talk to a piece of machinery. We said our words into a receiver, and we heard words out of the receiver, but the receiver made noises that represented for us the person we were talking to. They thought that same kind of way about idols. They thought of them as truly capturing the essence of the god or goddess, so to have the presence of the god or goddess was desirable. Now the Lord, on the other hand, refused to be represented by any such thing; and people found it hard to think of worshiping an invisible God. They were not sure that He was there.

B. Allowed for Selfishness

The second attraction was that it was selfish. True Israelite religion, as revealed by God to Moses and thereafter, required that people have ethics, that people live in a godly way. This was not required at all of people in the system known as idolatry; it was effectively a materialistic system. One thing that people believed that gods could not do in the ancient world was feed themselves. Now, the Israelites did not think this way, those who were orthodox; but all idolatrists did. They thought the gods had all kinds of power and could do anything but feed themselves, so the ability to feed the gods was one hold you had over the gods. They assumed that if they brought food to that idol, the god who that idol represented would have to bless them in return. So they had a control; they had a connection; they had a quid pro quo kind of arrangement.

C. It Was Easy.

Also, idolatry was easy, since you did not have to keep all kinds of commandments. The only thing you really had to do was worship frequently and generously. If you gave to the idol, what you understood the idol wanted, that was all that was required. You could be morally a complete loser; you could misuse and abuse others for your own gain and profit. It did not matter. Keep the idol happy and that was all that was required. No ethical standards were imposed.

D. It Was Convenient.

Also, idolatry was convenient in the sense of everybody being able to worship whenever he or she felt like it. The Israelites had to go three times a year to one central sanctuary if they were orthodox and really worshiped the Lord. Corporate national worship was required and the procedures were elaborate. In idolatry, you could worship anywhere almost any time of day. There were, as the prophetic books described it, idol shrines "on every high hill and under every green tree." They were everywhere. It is a little like the sign "five barbers, no waiting." Shrines everywhere, no waiting. Sometimes a shrine would be just a little assemblage of some rocks under a tree and a little altar there on which a meal could be cooked, and one single priest and worshipers would go and worship the idol that was placed there by that priest and think that they had gotten through to a god or goddess.

E. Regarded as Normal.

Idolatry was regarded as normal. The Israelites were really an exceptional people to be told to worship an invisible God without using idols. Everybody else used idolatry; everybody else was caught up in that system. The powerful nations of the world, the great superpowers were the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians. The wealthy nations like Tyre, the city-state of Tyre, fabulously wealthy from its sea trade, worshiped idols there by the dozens. The Canaanites, among whom the Israelites lived, worshiped idols. All the nations around them, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the Philistines, the Arameans, they worshiped idols; so it was strange, unusual, weird, and different not to engage in that practice.

F. It Was Logical.

Also, idolatry seemed logical. How could one god do everything that Moses had taught the people the Lord, the true God, could do? How could one god do all that? It simply did not make sense. There ought to be many, many gods and goddesses. Just as you need many advisors to a king and many workers for a project, surely there are all sorts of gods and goddesses. And each one needs his or her idol; and the idols help to remember who they are and to keep them straight, and so on. If you lived in the ancient world, you would probably do what most people then did. You would worship three kinds of gods: you would have a personal god; you would have a family god, who might be the personal god of one of your ancestors; and then you would have a national god. Now the Israelites never stopped worshiping and believing in the Lord as their national God.

II. Syncretistic Nature of Israelite Religion.

A. Yahweh: Israel's National God.

All during 1 and 2 Kings, even right down to the destruction of the north by the Assyrians and the destruction of the south by the Babylonians, they still would consider the Lord to be their national God in times of battle. In times of national danger, with regard to national events, they would worship Him. But when it came to personal matters, getting out of an illness; or getting your personal needs answered; or having a good crop this year; for family matters, things that would be shared in the rest of your clan or family, then you would worship this god or that goddess and not the Lord. That kind of thing that we call syncretism, the combining of various religious practices, was what characterized Israelite religion.

It seemed logical to them. "Let the Lord (Yahweh, as we pronounce His name in the Hebrew) do His thing on the national level; but when it comes to me or to my family, well, we are not going to go with a general practitioner like Him." Idolatry was also pleasing to the senses. It is nice to be able to make idols; it is nice to be able to have pictures of things all over the walls of the temples and shrines; it is nice to bow down to them and to kiss them and so on. It is pleasing to see things overlaid in gold or silver, that was an attraction. There was nothing to look at when you worshiped Yahweh, and that did not appeal to people.

B. Symbolic Meals.

There was also indulgence. True religion demands symbolic meals. The apostle Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 11 that if you are hungry, you do not go to Communion to stuff yourself; it is a symbolic meal. You discern in that meal the death of Christ; whereas, in ancient times, it generally was the case that people loved to indulge themselves. They would eat heavily in connection with idol worship; the bigger the meal, the better. They would drink heavily. Amos describes people drinking beside the altar of their gods, wine that they had taken away from poor people who had harvested that wine in the grape harvest and had it as their only means of livelihood to sell it. These people, having defrauded the poor, were now glugging down the wine as they lay beside the pagan altars. That kind of indulgence is what was very popular.

C. Symbolic Acts.

The final attraction was sexual. In most pagan worship, the opportunity for sex with a shrine prostitute was also provided. This was thought, in the mentality of that day, that mythological way of thinking, to stimulate the powers of nature. Everything that was created was procreated; in other words, it was born into being. People thought that you could, by the symbolic act of sex with a prostitute, actually sort of stimulate, and by sympathetic magic, you could cause the gods in heaven likewise to mate and to have offspring. These offspring would be the plants of the field or the trees or the goats or the sheep or whatever. Imagine the attraction of that sort of thing where people can actually indulge baser passions and get religious credit for it. All these reasons, corrupt and misleading as they were, far from the truth as they were, were attractive to the Israelites and caused, what we see so often in 2 Kings, the people again and again turning away from the true God and to idolatry.

III. Endings and Beginnings: A Tale of Two Prophets (1:1-8:15).

A. Conclusion of Elijah's Ministry.

When Elijah, who had stood alone for quite a time against that paganism and those attractions of idolatry, is described as taken up into heaven in 2 Kings 2 we know that this is an approbation of God; this is an indication of God's favor for the message that prophet spoke. We also read that Elisha, his successor, asks for succession in terms of "a double portion of your spirit." This can be misunderstood. It doesn't mean that you can have various levels of the Spirit of God, as if one person has level x and somebody has level 2x or whatever, but rather the double portion was always the portion of the heir. The double portion of the prophet is what the heir inherited.

It is a simple, natural way for Elisha to say, "May I be your spiritual heir? Do you as a prophet believe that God is telling you that I am to succeed you?" Elijah said, "I do not know. I have not been given that word from the Lord, but I do know this: If you see me taken from you, that will be a sign." So, in fulfillment of that prophecy, indeed Elisha did see him taken, and Elisha then succeeds Elijah.

B. Ministry of Elisha.

Many of the stories we read about in the early chapters of 2 Kings are stories about those things that Elisha does, particularly miracle stories: turning water to oil so that a widow can have livelihood; or cleansing water that is poison; or causing an axhead to float; or feeding a large number of people, almost in anticipation of Jesus' miracles of feeding the 4,000 and the 5,000.

IV. The Kings of Israel and Judah (8:16-17:41).

A. King Maker and Breaker.

One of the roles of the prophet was king maker and king breaker. When God decided that He wanted to have a king, He had a prophet anoint that king. That is how David became king; Samuel anointed him. Also, a prophet could announce that a king's time was over as Samuel had done to Saul. In the case of Elisha, he is a king maker; that is, he works for God to announce God's purposes. And one of the kings that he anoints is a king of Syria named Hazael. He is sent by God to anoint him, but he hates to do it. He says in the process, "I know all the harm you will do to the people of Israel." In other words, God used this prophet to anoint one of the enemies of Israel, because God's wrath against His people was so great that He was going to bring that enemy against them in punishment.

Another person that Elisha anoints is named Jehu. And this King Jehu will bring to an end that powerful dynasty of Omri that had included Ahab and other influential kings in the north. What Jehu does is to declare a great ceremony, "We are going to worship Baal, and we are going to have a great feast in his honor." He gathers together all of the family members of the dynasty in the north at that time, and he also gathers the southern kings, and then proceeds, in the middle of the feast, to kill them all. Fortunately, not all of them get killed; so there still is a successor for David in the south as God mercifully provides. But this is a very interesting time. Here is a northern king named Jehu who hates the worship of the false god Baal. In other words, the influence of Elijah and Elisha was such that for a time the north turned away from ardent Baal worship and closer toward the worship of the true Lord, the God of Israel. Unfortunately, it did not last long; it did not last long at all, and it did not last in the south as well. We see during the

section of Kings that goes from chapters 11 -14 on, not many good kings either in the north or the south obeying God, keeping His commandments, eager to follow His covenant.

B. Assyria on the Move.

By the late 700s, toward the end of the eighth century B.C., the superpower Assyria, began to assert its dominance. A king named Tiglath-Pileser III, king of Assyria, began an empire-building plan in 745 B.C. His desire was to conquer all the territories he could. A reason for this was economic, not the only reason, but it was one of them. The Assyrians needed money for building projects, for the establishment of a powerful defense, for the indulgences of the king; and one way you can get money is to go take it by conquering another territory. Conquer somebody else's country, take everything out of it that you can when you conquer it, and then impose taxes on it annually so that they will have to pay tax and tolls and tributes of various kinds. You will have plenty of money then by impoverishing them to pay for the kinds of things your government wants to do. That was one of the motivators for Tiglath-Pileser, and so he set out to conquer every country he could conquer. And the more he conquered, the more he could impress people into his military and say to them, "You will either be killed or you will fight for me." The bigger the army he had, the more money he had to finance the army with, the more imposing his power would become.

C. Pekah and Rezin Form a Coalition.

Soon enough, both Israel and Judah were threatened. At the same time, they were turning to idolatry, to the false gods and goddesses and almost never turning to the Lord to deliver them. So we read in 2 Kings 15 -16 about the shenanigans that they pulled in those days, about their desperate acts trying to solve things, trying to gain power against the Assyrians. One of the most comical (if it were not so tragic) events is what we call the Syro-Ephraimite War. What happened is this: a king named Pekah in northern Israel aligned himself with a king named Rezin in Syria, and the two of them formed a coalition of all the nations in the area to try to fight off the Assyrians.

The time was 734 B.C. They naturally went to Judah to ask them to join in this coalition. "We are going to be able to beat the Assyrians; we are going to get freedom from them; we are going to have independence; we no longer will have to pay these enormous taxes, tolls, and tributes." These things looked good, and it looked good and was even appealing to King Ahaz, but God's prophet Isaiah said, "No way!" God wants you to trust in Him, not in these political military alliances. Let God defend you. And Ahaz listened to Isaiah the prophet; and so he says "no, we will not join you." Well, what would you do? They said if we have got Judah right in our midst, right in the center of the coalition, refusing to fight with us, let us attack them. We will conquer them. We will put our man on the throne of Judah, instead of this resistant guy, Ahaz; and then we will be truly united and attack the forces of the Assyrians. What would you do if you were Ahaz when that happened? He immediately sent messengers to the Assyrians saying, "Help! Because I will not fight you, they are attacking me."

D. Fall of Samaria.

This was not what God wanted; this was not what Isaiah had prophesied. Indeed, Isaiah rebuked Ahaz for doing that, but it did bring in the Assyrians. And the Assyrians did attack the members of that coalition, and they reduced at that time (734 and 733 B.C.) the northern part of Israel, the ten northern tribes, really down to one. They annexed virtually all of the north except for the tribal territory that we call Ephraim. You will see sometimes in the books that come from around that period reference to "Ephraim this" and "Ephraim that," because the north was reduced to that territory. You will also see references to Samaria because the capital city was in Ephraim, and really it was not a lot bigger than a city-state. It was nothing like the original boundaries. Most of the north was in the hands of the Assyrians. Then further, in chapter 17, we read the story of how just a decade later the Assyrians finally finished the job. They came and took also the territory of Ephraim and its capital city, Samaria, so the north was gone. By 722 B.C., the north was gone and it is now just part of the empire of Assyria.

V. From Accession of Hezekiah to the Captivity of Judah (18:1-25:30).

A. Hezekiah.

So what is to happen to Judah? Thereafter, a good king named Hezekiah on the throne of Judah, is usually faithful to God. His key advisor is the prophet Isaiah once again, and he listens to Isaiah nearly all the time. He makes some serious mistakes though, even after God spares Jerusalem when it is attacked by the Assyrians, so that in the vast Assyrian Empire in the western part of the Fertile Crescent only Judah is free, an isle of independence in the midst of conquered territory after territory after territory. But, Hezekiah does make some mistakes.

One of them is to show envoys from Babylon around Jerusalem. In chapter 20, you read how he, hoping that these Babylonians might turn out to be kind of rivals to the Assyrians and perhaps rescuers of the situation. He seeks an alliance with them and does everything he can to make envoys from their king, Merodach-Baladan, like him and like the Judeans. The danger is that, of course, Babylon will eventually conquer Assyria and will be the enemy, not the friend.

B. A Short Time Remaining.

Chapter 21 tells of how, after Hezekiah's death, the worst king of the whole bunch comes to power and reigns fifty-five years and is so influential in bringing full-blown idolatry, corruption of all sorts, practices that are completely inimical to everything that God had taught. It can be only a matter of time until the nation of Judah, also the remainder state, that last part that has not yet been conquered, will also be conquered and its people exiled. One king remained in the way of that happening almost immediately, and that was Josiah. He instituted extensive reforms based on the Word of God in 2 Kings 22-23.

C. Fall of Judah and Jerusalem.

After Josiah's death in 609 B.C., his successor reverts back to the practices that condemn the nation to death, and death is its fate indeed. By chapter 25, we read of the fall of Judah and Jerusalem, now captured by a successor to the Assyrians, a superpower, the Babylonians. With that fall of Jerusalem comes the great exile. By the thousands, the people are taken and resettled in various parts of the Babylonian Empire. Northern Israel is gone; southern Israel is gone. There is no more nation; there is no more king. The people of God are defeated. They

have been conquered, and large numbers of them are deported, and as the prophecy way back in Leviticus 26 has it, the land now lies in Sabbath, it is in rest.