

April 1 : Scriptures 1 Kings 6-7

SUMMARY

Chapter 6 opens with the Temple's construction commencing (imagine herald trumpets blaring here!). It's been 480 years since Israel left Egypt during the Exodus (c. 960 B.C.). Remember that the Lord had been "living" in a tent the entire time, whether it was the Tabernacle built by Moses (Wilderness, Gilgal, Shiloh) or in David's Tent (Jerusalem), as His presence was always with the Ark. The Lord had only a short hiatus outside the land of Israel when the Philistines foolishly captured the Ark.

What follows are a lot of architectural dimensions. The Temple was 90' deep, 30' wide, and 45' high, fronted by a portico, an entrance, 30' wide and 15' deep. Solomon built three levels of rooms in rows along both outer walls surrounding the 90' section of the building that housed the Holy Place and Most Holy Place.

The Temple's construction used finished stones cut at the quarry so that no hammer, chisel, or any iron tool was heard in the Temple while it was being built (6:7). Why is that? The standard explanation is that the stone cutting tools are made from the same base material as weapons of war – metal. It would be inappropriate for the sound of "war" (metal clanking) to be heard in the place where the King of Peace resides.

After the basic structure of the Temple was in place, Solomon used cedarwood to panel the interior (6:9, from the famous cedars of Lebanon). Can you imagine how that place smelled of cedar mixed with the fragrant incense presented at the Golden Altar in front of the parochet (*pah-roh-chet'* – the curtain that divided the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies)?

I find the cautionary word of the Lord interesting in 6:11-13. Despite all the attention to detail, it's as if the Lord was reminding Solomon that the Temple itself is not the critical thing; obedience is. After Solomon, it won't take too many generations before the Lord speaks a word of rebuke through the prophet Jeremiah to this very issue.

And back we go to Solomon finishing the Temple. Once the stone infrastructure is done, the interior walls are paneled (6:16), then carved the wood with decorations and plated the walls with pure gold (6:18, 20-22). Now imagine standing in the Holy Place, and you're in a gold-plated box. Lighting is not an issue because of the beveled windows Solomon carved into the walls near the top of the ceiling, and at night, the menorah gave all the needed light. The polished gold walls acted like an all-encompassing mirror that washed the interior in a golden glow! If you're wondering, 45,000 pounds (22 ½ tons) of

gold was used to overlay the 30'x30'x30' room. The builders used "gold nails" to fix the plating to the wood paneling. However, since gold is very soft, there is speculation whether these were decorative nails or hard metal nails plated with gold.

Next, Solomon's team built statues of two huge cherubim (spiritual beings with wings) for the Holy of Holies. They faced the curtain, side by side, and their outstretched wings touched the walls on both sides and met in the middle over the spot where the Ark would soon come to rest (6:23-28). They are heavenly creatures that reside in the presence of the Lord and accompany His throne. (See Ezekiel 10. 10:20 identifies the "four living creatures" Ezekiel saw by the Chebar Canal as cherubim. See also Ezekiel 1). Cherubim have two sets of wings. Seraphim have three sets according to Isaiah 6. The Lord commanded Moses to construct two cherubim for the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant. Why? Because the Mercy Seat and the Ark are the throne of God on earth, and his presence manifests above them. *The Lord was making a copy of the heavenly realities* (Hebrews 9:23-24). Now Solomon constructs two massive cherubim between which the Ark will rest to duplicate the heavenly reality of God's throne room on earth.

A motif of cherubim, flowers, and palms decorates the rest of the interior, and again the walls and the floor are plated with gold. Next, the enormous olive wood entry doors are installed, decorated, and plated in the same manner. A stone wall defines the outer courtyard.

Although the text hustles us through the construction process, this was no quick, slap-dash feat. Solomon's crew began the Lord's Temple project in the second month (Ziv, commonly known as Iyyar today/April-May) and completed it seven years and six months later.

Now that the Lord has His "palace," which houses His throne (the Ark), Solomon sets about constructing his palace in chapter 7. As the text says, it took thirteen years to complete his royal complex (7:1). As you read through the chapter, note how the same basic construction technique is used – a costly stone infrastructure overlaid with cedarwood paneling. What impresses me the most is that the dressed stones and fitted stones were quarried and shaped offsite, transported to the Temple/Palace site, and set in place (7:11-12). For you visual learners, take a moment to peruse the internet image search engines using the words "Solomon's palace." You might also want to try "Solomon's palace architecture" to see if any architect geeks tackled the design presented in the text.

Next, we move to the bronze work by Hiram (Hiram, 2 Chronicles 4:11) of Tyre. He's a bronze craftsman who "had great skill, understanding, and knowledge to do every kind of bronze work" (7:14). He cast two massive bronze pillars (27' high and 18' in circumference) with top pieces (7' tall capitals) and set them on either side of the massive olivewood entrance doors. The two pillars were nick-named Boaz, which means "In Him is strength," and Jachin, which means "He shall establish." Both names reminded people of the mighty God of Israel they served. These two pillars welcomed every priest who entered the Lord's Temple to worship and serve Yehovah. The Bronze pillars would produce a sense of awe as one approached the Temple. Such immense pillars conveyed the imposing stature, strength, and beauty of the Lord compared to a human being.

The following bronze items Hiram cast were the 15' diameter bronze washbasin on the twelve oxen pedestal (Bronze Laver, 7:23), the 6' square carts for transporting water around the sacrificial preparation tables (washing hands, sacrificial parts, and tools), and the various bronze tools used for the Temple services.

Here's a fascinating detail most of us don't catch right away. Just as the stone was cut and shaped offsite, Hiram cast the bronze items offsite as well. Check this out, "The king had them cast in clay molds in the Jordan Valley between Succoth and Zarethan" (7:46). Imagine that! Hiram had to dig out the molds in the clay of the Jordan River valley, cast the pillars in two halves, then join them together. Hiram produced the rest of the articles in similar clay molds. Then all of this heavy bronze had to be transported about 25 miles (as the crow flies) to the Jerusalem Temple work site. What an undertaking! I wonder if there are any remnants of the clay molds that archaeologists have discovered?

To cap off this chapter and the Temple's construction, Solomon has his team cast the gold items for the Temple. Solomon brings them all into the Temple with his father, David's contributions to prepare for full operation.

INSIGHT

As we build our lives according to the Lord's design, let's acknowledge that we can't do it alone. We need other people to help us grow in the Lord. Yes, we have the blueprints – the Bible – and the architect – the Holy Spirit – but we need those who have the skills, understanding, and knowledge to guide us through the sanctification process successfully, the process that helps us be less like sinful people and more like Jesus.

April 2 : Scriptures 1 Kings 8-10

SUMMARY

As we open today's reading, starting with chapter 8, be prepared for the big "Wow!" Chapter 8 records the Lord's presence filling the newly-completed Temple and Solomon's dedication to the Lord of His Temple. Chapter 9 is the Lord's response to Solomon's prayer of dedication, Solomon's gift to Hiram of twenty towns for his help, and other things Solomon did. And finally, in chapter 10, we read about the famous Queen of Sheba's visit to the most wealthy and wise king on earth at the time. There is so much information in these three chapters I want to include only a few observations, or you'll be at this reading all day, okay?

With all the other furnishings in place, the last and most crucial holy item to bring into the Temple was the Lord's throne, the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark procession involved the elders and the tribal leaders as representatives of all of Israel and King Solomon himself. Solomon gathered the people of Israel in Jerusalem for the grand procession (8:1-2). This event occurred in the 7th month of the Bible/Jewish calendar, Tishri (mid-September to mid-October). Why is this important? Because the week-long Feast of Sukkot ("Tabernacles" or "Tents") celebrates the final harvest of the year (like the U.S. Thanksgiving Day) and commemorates Israel's 40-year wilderness campout with the Lord. The theme is Yehovah's reign over His people, His protection and provision, and His total care for His people. The Temple embodies Israel's King, dwelling in their midst upon His throne.

It's fitting that after His "palace" is completed and His "throne" is placed, Israel's King makes His appearance (8:10-11). His presence is so intense that not even the consecrated priests could carry on their spiritual functions!

Solomon blesses the people and proclaims Yehovah's faithfulness for giving His word to his father, David, and fulfilling it to him. The crux of Yehovah's word to David was 1) He would have a son, 2) that son would take David's place on the throne, and 3) that son would build the Lord's Temple. The fulfillment took twelve years to pass, but the evidence stands before Solomon, the priests, the Levites, and all the people – a Temple filled with the Lord's glory! *One of the Lord's most outstanding traits is His absolute trustworthiness and reliability in fulfilling His promises (8:12-21).*

God did not demand a temple. His only command was to construct a temporary Tabernacle. The Lord's choice was not a place for His name but a man who would honor His name (8:16). David so honored the Lord that he wanted to build a structure to glorify

God's name = God Himself (8:17). The Lord, in turn, honors King David's desire, though the Lord had commanded no such thing. Even though our desire doesn't seem to originate with the Lord, He commends those which come from right, honest, and godly motives (8:18).

Solomon now prays one of the greatest prayers in the Bible. I'll try to distill it down:

- Lord, You're a covenant-keeping God. There is no God like You (8:23)!
- Lord, you have kept Your promise in the past (8:23-24).
- Lord, now keep Your promise into the future and confirm Your word (8:25-26).
- But Lord, will You indeed live on earth? Not even the greatest expanse of heaven can hold Your presence, much less this little Temple (8:27).
- Please, Lord, listen to my prayers, for this is where You now live, and we will seek You here (8:28-30).
- Request for righteous judgments from Yehovah (8:31-32).
- Request for the forgiveness of sin, which has caused Israel to be defeated before their enemies (8:33-34).
- Request for the forgiveness of sin, which has caused the Lord to withhold life-giving rain (8:35-36).
- Request for the forgiveness of sin, which has brought upon Israel famine, pestilence, blight, destructive mildew, insect devastation, invading enemies, plagues, and sickness (8:37-40).
- Request for the Lord to listen to non-Israelites when they come to pray toward Israel's God as a witness to Him being the Almighty, One True God (8:41-43). *This request is one of my favorite requests! We should take this to heart and confidently come to the Lord in prayer (Hebrews 10:22, 11:6).*
- Request for success in God-ordained battles (8:44-45).
- Request for the forgiveness of sin, which has resulted in capture, deportation, and exile from the land God has given to Israel (8:46-53).

Solomon concludes his dedication of the Temple to Yehovah with a rousing blessing for the people, complete with thousands of sacrifices. There were so many animals offered that they had to consecrate the entire courtyard because the Bronze Altar was too small to handle the load (8:63)!

But for me, there's a bittersweet tinge to Solomon's prayer. It hits me when I read, "May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our ancestors. May he not abandon us or leave us so that he causes us to be devoted to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commands, statutes, and ordinances, which he commanded our ancestors" (8:57-58). It won't take long until we read about Solomon's drift from the Lord, the introduction of

idolatry through this very king, which sets Israel on the path to discipline and exile. Our hearts are indeed desperately wicked. Despite our best intentions, it's tough to stay the course. We must constantly watch out for compromise in our lives to live in the Lord's presence and not away from it. But let's not let that spoiler alert wreck our high point in Solomon's life right now.

Oh well, never mind. In chapter 9, the Lord gives guidance and a warning to Solomon against straying from Him (9:1-9). It's an if-then warning. IF Solomon remains faithful, THEN God will establish his family line. IF not, THEN Yehovah will deal with Solomon, his descendants, and all of Israel in the harshest way – the Temple that was just dedicated will be destroyed as a testimony of Israel's apostasy.

Kings Solomon and Hiram exchange gifts! Solomon gave Hiram cities. Why? Solomon originally contracted with Hiram for wood (5:10-11) and workers (5:6). Apparently, Solomon's expenses were far more than he bargained. Hiram also sent gold to Solomon. These cities on the Phoenician-Galilee border were probably given as collateral until Solomon's debt could be repaid. This gifting of cities likely occurred as he increased in wealth, especially after his gold expedition to Ophir or the Queen of Sheba's visit.

The remainder of the chapter summarizes Solomon's building programs, forced labor (from the remaining Canaanites), conscription of troops from among the Israelites, rehousing of Pharaoh's daughter, sacrifices, and his fleet of ships.

Wow, what a big reading we had today! But we're still not done. We have the Queen of Sheba event. Sadly, the circumstances around this visit – Solomon's fame, influence, strength, and wealth – all start to turn the king's heart away from the Lord.

First, where was Sheba? It's believed she ruled the Sabeans of southern Arabia or a group of colonies in northwestern Arabia. Some also believe her kingdom included Yemen in southwest Arabia. Why did she make a state visit to Solomon? According to our text, she heard of his fame and came to ask him difficult questions. Solomon's fame would have spread easily by their relatively close proximity to Israel and Israel's positioning on the major trade routes. The Queen of Sheba likely paid a state visit to establish trade relations with the highly influential king. The fact that she brought such an array of precious cargo supports this idea.

Long story short, she was not disappointed! "But I didn't believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, I was not even told half. Your wisdom and prosperity far exceed the report I heard. How happy are your men. How happy are these servants

of yours, who always stand in your presence hearing your wisdom" (10:7-8). As is usual among sovereigns, they exchanged wealth as a show of allegiance and respect, and the Queen left for home stunned by what she had experienced!

Even more stunning is the vastness of King Solomon's wealth. His baseline annual income was 25 tons of gold! In today's terms, 25 tons = 50,000 pounds = 729,166 troy ounces. At a spot price of \$1,935.00/troy ounce = \$1,410,936, 210.00. That's an annual income of 1.4 billion dollars! Since the king and the nation are one, this would likely be Israel's national annual income as well. Gold was so plentiful, that silver was considered as nothing (10:21).

INSIGHT

Initially, the Lord walked with humanity in the Garden of Eden. Living among His people was and still is God's intent. But sin brought a separation between God and humanity, and it wasn't just spiritual. Sin created a complete break that only God can heal.

The Lord is both far and near, and He exists outside of the temporal reality of time and space, yet He chooses to live within it simultaneously. The most startling manifestation of this is Jesus, God's eternal spiritual being in a limited physical body. The Holy Spirit, God's shekinah (manifest presence, real presence), now resides in every believer. "He is the Spirit of truth. The world is unable to receive Him because it doesn't see Him or know Him. But you do know Him because He remains with you and will be in you" (John 14:17 HCSB).

Therefore, we as individuals are a temple of the Living God even though there is no Temple in Jerusalem. "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19 NKJV). Together all believers are spiritual stones making up the Lord's Temple. We also serve Him as priests as we go about our daily lives. We worship Him in song, prayers, intercession, and righteous living, and we proclaim His praises in word and deed. "You yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5 HCSB) and "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9 HCSB).

The Lord's presence resided in a temporary Tabernacle, a Temple, in Jesus' human flesh, and now in our flesh. The Lord desires to have His children as close to Him as possible

and remove all barriers to full fellowship with us! “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea no longer existed. I also saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look! God’s dwelling is with humanity, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:1-3 HCSB). “I did not see a sanctuary in it, because the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its sanctuary. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because God’s glory illuminates it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” (Revelation 21:22-24 HCSB).

April 3 : Scriptures 1 Kings 11-13

SUMMARY

And sadly, everything begins to compost in Solomon's life. He sure figured out how to do things the wrong way for a wise man. Chapter 11 is the beginning of Israel's eventual downfall. Yes, idolatry was introduced to Israel way back in the book of Judges (ch. 18), but it received official sanction under Solomon. How disappointed would King David have been if he'd been alive to see how far off his son's spiritual life fell!

How did it happen? Alliances and lust. It wasn't uncommon for kings to intermarry with other monarchs' families to strengthen partnerships. Given Solomon's wealth, power, and influence, you can imagine how desirable it would be for a foreign king to align himself with King Solomon and Israel. Add Solomon's physical desires (shall we say), and it's easy to understand why he had such a large harem, only 700 wives and 300 concubines. But the Lord warned about that in His Torah (11:3). Yehovah specifically told Israel's future kings not to make alliances with foreign kings through marriage because they would turn his heart from following Yehovah (Deuteronomy 17:17). Evidently, Solomon wasn't as in love with God's Torah as his father, David. Did Solomon forget Yehovah's covenant with David? Did he forget the blessings and curses tacked onto the covenant to encourage faithfulness? In short, this is the essence of David's covenant:

- If Faithful: You will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.
- If Unfaithful: You will fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.

- If Faithful: You will stay on the land I gave you, I will accept the Temple you built for Me, Israel will be honored and esteemed in the nations' eyes.
- If Unfaithful: I will kick Israel off the land I gave them and destroy the Temple. The nations with scorn and ridicule Israel (the people) among which I scatter them.

- Covenant reason for discipline: They abandoned me and clung to other gods, worshiping and serving them.

But Solomon embraced his ladies' gods over time. Here are some of the foreign idols he embraced in worship:

- Sidonians' god, Ashtoreth. The Canaanite fertility goddess, also called Ashtaroth, Astarte, or Ishtar, is sometimes regarded as a war goddess. Ashtoreth was later associated with Venus and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and often linked to Ba'al, the Canaanite god of rain and thunder. Therefore, Ashtoreth and Baal were associated with land, animal, and human fertility.

- Ammonites' god, Milcom. The Ammonites were descendants of Lot through incest (Ammon, Genesis 19:30-38). Could that root of sin have opened the door to this evil spiritual influence? The Hebrew for "detestable" also includes "abominable" and "filthy." Milcom was more commonly known as Molech or Moloch, and worship of this horrible demon involved burning children alive. Yes, child sacrifice, spilling innocent blood.
- Moabite's god, Chemosh. The Moabites were descendants of Lot through incest with his other daughter. (Moab. Ibid.) Chemosh was the chief god, the war god of the Moabites, and Chemosh worship also included human sacrifice.

Yes, yucky stuff. But Solomon was blinded by his human desires. For a good insight into Solomon's condition in his later years, read Ecclesiastes. It's the writing of a tired man who has finally gained enough perspective to see his folly and the value of sticking close to God. Sadly, the damage had already been done.

Therefore, the Lord drops the hammer. 1) You will lose the kingdom, but not all of it. 2) I promised your father an everlasting kingdom, but I didn't say how big it would be. I'm taking all but one portion away and leaving Jerusalem in your family's hands (11:11-13).

Part of Yehovah's covenant agreement with His kings and the nation was to keep Israel's enemies at bay. The Lord begins to shake things loose now that Solomon has broken the deal. Hadad of Edom (a king over Israel's cousin nation) and Rezon of Damascus (a foreign king) rise as adversaries. More importantly, the Lord brings forth Solomon's future competition – "Jeroboam, son of Nebat, was an Ephraimite" (11:26). This dude starts as Solomon's foreman, and he is so capable of working with people King Solomon puts him in charge of his entire labor force. Do you see how this gives Jeroboam visibility, a platform for influence, training for royal management, and favor among the people?

A prophet meets Jeroboam on the road and reveals the Lord's word to him. Yehovah will give him ten of the twelve tribes to rule over as king, but only as a steward until Solomon and all Israel understand that idolatry is wrong, repent, and turn back to God. And while he is the steward king over Israel, Jeroboam is bound by the same parameters as David's descendants are. "After that, if you obey all I command you, walk in my ways, and do what is right in my sight in order to keep my statutes and my commands as my servant David did, I will be with you. I will build you a lasting dynasty just as I built for David, and I will give you Israel. 39 I will humble David's descendants, because of their unfaithfulness, but not forever" (11:38-39). However, word gets to Solomon of Jeroboam's

potential threat to his throne that he seeks to nullify God's word by killing Jeroboam, who escapes to Egypt.

The chapter ends with Solomon's death. After reigning over Israel for forty years, his son, Rehoboam, succeeds Solomon as king over all of Israel. But the "all Israel" thing won't last for long because the Lord said the national split wouldn't happen during Solomon's reign but during his son's. It's time for the Lord's word to be fulfilled!

Chapter 12 begins with the events that cause Israel's national division. Once the threat to his life ended, Jeroboam returned to Israel and rejoined the people. The populous come to the new king, Rehoboam, and ask for a respite from the harsh service Solomon had imposed on them. The solution is simple – bless the people, and they will bless you with their loyalty. Simple, right? Wrong. Not to a new king who wants to prove himself and step out from his father's immense shadow. Rehoboam foolishly listens to his inexperienced and bodacious friends rather than the experienced elders tempered by wisdom. "You think it was rough under my father's rule? You ain't seen nothing yet. I'll show you who's boss around here. Nobodies gonna tell me what to do!" Stupid, stupid man. But this was from the Lord, after all.

And with those fighting words, ten tribes realize that Rehoboam of Judah is trying to dominate all the other Israelite tribal families. Because of his massive push on them, ten tribes of Israel push back on him, and the nation becomes a house divided (12:16-17). And as a famous rabbi said, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand" (Mark 3:24-25). The house of Israel divides, and the kingdom of Israel is doomed to fall unless it can pull itself together. Rehoboam sends his labor force manager, Adoram (Jeroboam's replacement), to pull things together, but the people stone Adoram to death. Rehoboam barely escapes (12:18). Rehoboam figures there's only one option left – an all-out military strike against the insurrectionists. Still, Yehovah waves him off through Shemaiah, the man of God, "This is what the Lord says: You are not to march up and fight against your brothers, the Israelites. Each of you return home, for this situation is from me" (12:24). They can't argue with that.

And so, the nation settles into its divided state. From now forward, the text will refer to the *northern kingdom of ten tribes as the Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim* and the *southern tribe plus Levites as the Kingdom of Judah*.

So how does Jeroboam do with his new status as steward king of the northern kingdom of Israel? Like Denethor, the Steward of Gondor in the book/movie *The Lord of the Rings*.

He believes he is the rightful king and refuses to relinquish power. But he knows the people will be tempted to fall back into the old mindset of one kingdom under the Davidic dynasty. So Jeroboam creates a “new normal.” He establishes a new capital city, Shechem, squarely in Joseph’s territory on the border of Ephraim and Menasseh (12:25). Next, he’s afraid he’ll lose the people if they obey Yehovah and go to Jerusalem for the three Pilgrim feasts of Passover, Shavuot, and Tabernacles. So Jeroboam creates a new worship system – golden calf worship (Wait! This didn’t work out the last time, did it?) with golden calf idols placed on the north and south borders. “Why travel to Jerusalem when you can do the same thing much closer here?” (12:28-29). He creates more places to worship (high places), creates priests out of non-Levite priests, along with new festivals and new sacrifices to supplant what Yehovah had laid down in His Torah (12:31-33). The result? The new kingdom of Israel is led into sin and stays there!

Remember what Yehovah said to Jeroboam about remaining faithful to Him? Yeah, well, that’s out the window, and the Lord sends word to Jeroboam that he’s *kaput* as Israel’s steward. A man of God from Judah rides over to Bethel, the place of Jeroboam’s southern golden calf, and prophecies of the Lord’s judgment on what King Jeroboam has started. It’s an amazing prophecy because of its astounding accuracy. There *will* be a descendant of David who will burn the bones of the priests who are standing there on the very altar they serve. As a sign, the altar will spontaneously split, and its ashes will pour out (13:2-3). To stop the man of God, Jeroboam reaches out, and the Lord shrivels his hand as the altar splits! The Lord shows wicked king Jeroboam mercy by healing his hand. When offered hospitality by the grateful king, the man of God declines, saying Yehovah told him not to accept *any* hospitality in the idolatrous region.

And now comes a really odd twist. The man of God meets an old prophet who offers him hospitality. Of course, the man of God declines, but the old prophet lies to him, saying, “I am also a prophet like you. An angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord: ‘Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat food and drink water’” (13:18). Why would the old prophet do that? Maybe he was looking for a spiritual recharge after what just happened to Jeroboam’s altar? Sometimes out-to-pasture spiritual leaders like to hang around the up-and-comers to regain a taste of what it was like in their hey-day? Or it could be that the old prophet wanted to host his colleague (for unknown reasons) and resorted to deception to make it happen. The prophet from Judah obediently rebuffed Jeroboam’s offer but failed to discern the old prophet’s deception and paid the price for his disobedience. Regardless, the man of God bought the old prophet’s story and went home with him.

There's just one problem, though. It's a problem that many of us can encounter. Yes, the Lord does talk to us. In fact, it's expected (John 10:27). The Holy Spirit's job is to speak to us to lead us into truth, guide us, and even tell us what's to come (John 14:26, 16:13). Okay, so once the Spirit speaks to us a directive word, we're supposed to follow it. It could be a matter of life and death. We just want to make sure we've heard clearly. The man of God had a clear word straight from the Lord. He even had a confirmation of his directive after seeing the Lord fulfill his prophecy with the altar smiting and King Jeroboam's healing. So why did he let the old prophet mislead him? It could be that the man of God trusted the old prophet based on his status as a prophet. Perhaps he felt that they were peers and the other had a corrective word from the Lord. The man of God should have followed what he heard from the Lord rather than put more weight on a word from a person, even though it was cloaked as the Lord's input.

Now the Lord kicks the old prophet's spiritual gift into gear. "This is what the Lord says: 'Because you rebelled against the Lord's command and did not keep the command that the Lord your God commanded you— but you went back and ate food and drank water in the place that he said to you, "Do not eat food and do not drink water"—your corpse will never reach the grave of your ancestors.'" (13:21-22). True to His word, the Lord sends a lion as His executioner. What three indicators show that this was a supernatural event and not natural? The lion did not eat the corpse, did not attack the donkey, and did not attack those who walked by (13:24-25).

Imagine how unnerving it would have been for the old prophet who had deceived the other prophet, which brought the man of God's death, to walk up to the body with the lion of judgment standing right next to it! The old prophet does what is right and honorable by taking the responsibility to bury and mourn his colleague (13:28-30). The old prophet makes an interesting request to his sons. Through the supernatural signs of the altar splitting and the lion killing the prophet, the old prophet now knows that the Bethel altar will indeed become the place of utter desecration. He knows that the current apostate priests' bones will be retrieved from their graves and burned on the idolatrous altar in the future. Its desecration will illustrate Yehovah's curse upon Jeroboam, the idolatrous system, and the apostates. The old prophet hopes that the people would leave the prophet of Judah's remains alone, and his bones would also avoid desecration while tucked in the same cave.

Meanwhile, Jeroboam continues in his idolatrous ways despite the loud and clear message from Yehovah, complete with hand withering and restoration.

INSIGHT

Whether you believe the Lord calls and equips prophets, prophetic ministry, or prophetic word today, there is still a vital lesson in today's reading. People can never overrule the Lord's clear word, and doing so can bring about discipline, even judgment. Yes, we need to build our interpretation and application skills, but some verses clearly reveal the Lord's will, such as murder, sexual immorality, stealing, etc. The Ten Commandments are foundational to a godly life, especially when Jesus reveals more than the letter of the law but also His Father's intent (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34). People are never allowed to override God's clear word, which reveals His will, which can lead to immediate or inevitable consequences.

April 4 : Scriptures 1 Kings 14-16

SUMMARY

As we continue our Cruisin' Through the Bible, we come to the part in the book of 1 & 2 Kings where the focus will shift back and forth from the kings of the northern kingdom, Israel, and the kings of the southern kingdom, Judah. Even a few of the names are identical so read carefully. Most Bibles have headings that will help. A good resource is a list of the two sets of kings and the years of their reigns. You can find these easily with an online search "Kings of Israel and Judah."

Chapter 14 launches right in with the first king of Israel, Jeroboam. His son is sick and sends his wife in disguise to consult with the same prophet who prophesied Jeroboam's rise to kingship. Hey, Ahijah got it right, and he'll certainly know what will become of his ailing son. Ahijah will reveal more than that, and Jeroboam won't like it.

The Lord is way ahead of Jeroboam's wife, and He's already told the prophet what to say. The moment her foot hits the threshold, the prophet lowers the boom. 1) I raised you to be Israel's steward king, but you failed to live up to My standard as king as David did. You've acted more wickedly than any other before you. You embraced idols and threw Me behind you (And I'm thinking right now, "And do you dare come to Me for help?"). 2) Your family is done. There will be no dynasty because I'm going to wipe out every male of your family. None of them will get the honor of burial except this one son. 3) And madam, your son will die the moment you step a foot into the city. 4) I'll bring forth another king who will wipe out your family. 5) Because of Israel's idolatry, I'm going to rip them from the covenant land and throw them east beyond the Euphrates River (14:7-16). Wow!

Now think about this. Jeroboam was the northern kingdom's first king, but Israel's doom was already set. It won't happen for about three hundred years, but it *will* happen. Israel will realize in harsh terms that Yehovah does not countenance idolatry!

Jeroboam's wife returns home, and as soon as she reaches the city limits, her son dies. Why is the timing significant? Because it confirms Ahijah's word. The house of Jeroboam and Israel's downfall has begun. Jeroboam reigned for twenty-two years and his son, Nadab, succeeded him.

Meanwhile, the focus shifts to Rehoboam, King Solomon's son. Frankly, after reading about this petulant man, I find it hard to believe David was his grandfather. Part of it might be attributed to his mom, Na'amah, who was an Ammonite and not part of the family of Israel. Perhaps there was a struggle with not being a "pure" Israelite that

produced such a harsh attitude toward his kinsfolk on his father's side? Rehoboam reigned for seventeen years, from forty-one to fifty-eight (14:21).

King Solomon's idolatry has taken root. As I've said before, "As the father goes, so goes the family." The southern kingdom of Judah has sunk into idolatry – high places, sacred pillars, Asherah poles (part of the fertility cult), and male cult prostitutes (for men and women), doing "all the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites" (14:24). How sad. Israel has dropped from faithfulness to apostasy in a little over one generation. How quickly a nation can decline!

As we've seen before, one of the covenant punishments for unfaithfulness is Yehovah lifting His protective hand from His people, and that's what happens now. King Shishak of Egypt attacks Israel and takes away all the gold shields King Solomon made, and King Rehoboam replaces them with lesser quality bronze shields (14:26-27). Judah's King Rehoboam dies after a war-filled reign against Jeroboam of Israel, and his son, Abijam, succeeds him.

Chapter 15 starts with the next king of Judah, Abijam. Yup, he's no peach. His reign could be summarized by "he was constantly at war with Jeroboam" and "he walked in all the idolatrous ways King Solomon introduced and his father, Rehoboam, established. The amazing thing to me is the Lord's faithfulness to David. Despite the growing apostasy and idolatry, the Lord maintains a successor for David's sake, no matter how spiritually corrupt the successor king is. Abijam reigned for three years and his son, Asa, succeeded him. As a side note, 1 & 2 Chronicles often give us details about Israel's and Judah's kings that 1 & 2 Kings don't and vice versa. That's why it's good to read both accounts when studying the kings. As for now, we'll just keep Cruisin' Through The Bible.

Judah's King Asa, on the other hand, is proof that one generation doesn't have to follow in the previous generation's footsteps. Despite his shortcomings later in life, King Asa is remembered as one of Judah's good kings. Asa became Judah's king while Jeroboam was still alive. However, Jeroboam will die that same year, and his son, Nadab, will take Israel's throne, as noted above.

King Asa "cleans house!" Even though the high places (hilltops and mountaintops where idolatry was practiced) remained, King Asa clears the forms of idolatry from Judah. Asa rids the land of the grossest idolatrous worship – the male cult prostitutes (15:12). He doesn't even let family relationships stand in the way as he deposes his grandmother Maacah as queen mother for what she had done (15:13). It is one of those beautiful reconsecration moments in Israel's history.

Here's another tip about reading through Kings and Chronicles. 1 & 2 Kings are written from an administrator's point of view, and 1 & 2 Chronicles are written from a priest's point of view. Kings notes wars and numbers, while Chronicles evaluates kings in a more spiritual sense. This is the case here. 1 Kings 15 moves from a summary of King Asa's spiritual acts immediately into war records. His reign includes a fight with another king of Israel, Baasha, who is encroaching on Judah's territory. In a traditional move, King Asa offers a substantial gift to a neighboring king, Ben-hadad of Aram (Syria today), asking him to break off support for Baasha, which he does. This strategy causes Baasha to refocus his attention closer to home, and after withdrawing from Judah's territory, King Asa sweeps in and takes all the construction materials back to Judah. King Asa reigns for forty-one years (15:10) and develops a foot disease before dying. His son, Jehoshaphat, succeeds him as Judah's king.

Now the camera swings back up to the kingdom of Israel to look at the short reign of Jeroboam's wicked and ungodly successor, Nadab. He only gets to rule for two years before Baasha strikes him down to take the throne. (Again, a biblical Game of Thrones!) Baasha fulfills the Lord's word as the king who will destroy Jeroboam's family dynasty (15:29). Baasha rules for twenty-four years (15:33), and as noted above, war commences between him and Judah's King Asa. While Baasha was the Lord's weapon of punishment against Jeroboam's family, he still walked in the idolatrous ways of Israel. Spoiler alert! It doesn't get any better with the northern kingdom as time goes on. Once founded upon idolatry, the rot keeps erupting (15:34).

Chapter 16 continues along the same course. The Lord speaks through the prophet Jehu (not the same Jehu who will pop up later). He declares that Baasha's family line will suffer the same punishment as Jeroboam's family line for the same reason – refusing to turn to God and stubbornly worshiping false gods (16:2-3). After twenty-four years, Baasha dies, and his son Elah succeeds him. Elah only reigns for two years. His servant, Zimri, cuts him down as Elah is getting drunk. Zimri goes on to eliminate every male in Baasha's/Elah's family line and among their circle of friends (16:11). Okay, maybe it's a bit overkill, but you get the point. Zimri wants *zero* contenders for Israel's throne. Again, Zimri is the Lord's weapon of covenant discipline against Baasha's family as Baasha was against Jeroboam's family.

So Zimri has the throne for just seven days (16:15)! You have that right. He executed Yehovah's judgment in a week, and the coup he ran meets a response. The army sides with their commander, Omri, and they march against Zimri. Zimri knows what's coming and does himself in (16:18). That leaves two contenders for Israel's throne – Omri and

Tibni. Omri's team proves stronger, and Tibni dies. Congratulations, Omri. You're the next king!

Omri has a modest run as king for twelve years. His claim to fame is he buys a hilltop from Shemer, builds a city, and names it Samaria, and this city will become the northern kingdom of Israel's capital. And what is the Lord's assessment of Omri's reign? He's the worst idolator king so far (16:25)! He dies and his son, Ahab, succeeds him.

For the record, all this kingly changeover happens during Judah's King Asa's reign. Over his forty-one-year reign, King Asa saw the rise and fall of Jeroboam I – Nadab (1st dynasty), Baasha – Elah (2nd dynasty), and Zimri – Tibni – Omri (3rd dynasty). Asa saw one of Israel's wickedest kings rise during his last three years – Ahab, Israel's 7th and most sinful king (875-853 B.C.).

Judah is doing spiritually great under Asa, but Israel is sinking fast under their line of wicked kings. King Ahab steps up to the plate and reigns for the next twenty-two years. Think again if you think Israel's kings can't get any worse than Omri. Ahab not only follows in his father's footsteps, but he also marries outside the family. You may have heard of her – Jezebel.

Jezebel was a princess of Phoenicia, now modern-day Lebanon. Her father was Ethbaal, a king and priest of Baal in Sidon. Likewise, Jezebel was also a priestess of Baal, and she brought Baal worship into her marriage to Ahab. (Didn't this guy ever read about Solomon and his idolatrous foreign alliance wives?) She was highly competent, conniving, powerful, and able to intimidate one of the Lord's most esteemed prophets, Elijah. Jezebel manipulated Ahab into adopting gross idolatry and other sins against Yehovah. She tried to destroy all of Yehovah's prophets in Israel and proved herself exceedingly evil. Her end was poetic and divine justice.

There's an interesting side note to chapter 16, "During his reign, Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho. At the cost of Abiram, his firstborn, he laid its foundation, and at the cost of Segub, his youngest, he finished its gates according to the word of the Lord spoken through Joshua, son of Nun" (16:34; Joshua 6:26). Jericho's destruction was around 1400 B.C., and this incident happened about 875 B.C. That means what Joshua cursed kicked in 565 years later!

Let me share this about the infamous Baal worship taking hold in Israel. Ahab went far beyond accepting Baal as just another god in his pantheon. Ahab "served Baal and worshipped him," meaning he went "whole hog" into Baal worship. Worshipping Baal

included building an altar and temple to Baal and setting up a wooden image. In essence, under Jezebel's influence and direction, Ahab established Baal worship as Israel's state religion, which would ultimately lead to Israel's destruction. And yet, the names of Ahab's sons seem to indicate that he didn't abandon the Lord completely.

Baal worship was adapted from the Babylonian god, Bel, god of the earth. Baal means "lord." There were many "baals" or gods in various areas and cities. This "Baal" was likely Baal-Melqart, a local version of Baal brought in from Sidon. Generally speaking, his worshippers regarded Baal as the god of storms, who brought rain to the land to make it fruitful. Thus, Baal was also regarded as a fertility god. Ashtoreth is viewed as his female counterpart and companion.

INSIGHT

Israel and Judah's battle against idolatry is a vivid lesson about why we shouldn't introduce or tolerate sin into our lives. Once a foothold is created, it's sometimes extremely difficult to stop a growing problem. Ask a drug user or alcoholic, or someone trapped by pornography. It doesn't matter which sin we're talking about, and anything that caters to our human desires in an ungodly way can become a lifelong snare. Sometimes this habitual sin can lead to tremendous problems and even our demise, as they did for Israel.

April 5 : Scriptures 1 Kings 17-19

SUMMARY

This is one of my all-time favorite events in the Bible! Chapter 17 introduces the great spiritual battle between Yehovah and his prophet, Elijah, versus Baal/Ashtoreth and their priests. This account is a knock-down, drag-out spiritual grudge match where the One True God of the Universe talks smack and throws down on His competition in a big way! *So, let's get ready to rumble!*

Chapter 17 cuts to the chase. On one side, Ahab and Jezebel push Baal worship, and the Israelites go along with them. On the other side, Yehovah expects Israel's covenant loyalty to Him alone as their ancestors promised. So, Yehovah once again pronounces covenant judgment against their idolatry. "You guys wanna worship the storm god so that your ground and flocks are fertile?" Tough luck! I'm gonna turn off the rain spigot for three years. Just see how your grain and livestock do without water. See ya around!" And with that, God's messenger, Elijah the prophet, turns and goes down to the Jordan River to live while the land dries up (17:5). God miraculously provides for him via ravens bringing Elijah food.

Time passes, and the water disappears. What's Elijah to do? Ironically, the Lord sends him to Zarephath (17:9) – *in Sidon!* The very same region from which wicked queen Jezebel came. So while she and Ahab introduce Baal worship to Israel, Yehovah cuts off the water from the so-called "storm god" and sends His prophet to Sidon, where the Lord will provide for Elijah, proving He's not just a local God, but the God who rules everywhere. Oh, the irony!

Elijah obeys and stays with the widow Yehovah arranged to care for him unbeknownst to her. Despite her poverty, she feeds Elijah in obedience to Yehovah's word. Lo and behold! The oil jug and the flour jar keep miraculously refilling! Again, the irony. Even on Baal's home turf, which is also suffering under the God-caused drought, Yehovah proves He's not only in control of the rain, but what the rain provides – oil (from olive trees) and flour (from grain).

But trouble comes. The gracious widow's son stops breathing. Most readers miss how serious this is for her. A widow has no husband (duh!), so her son is or will be her only support in her old age apart from community charity, which can be lacking. She's caught in a quandary. "Elijah, you came here under the Lord's leading for me to provide for you. Now my life's support is gone. What sin have I done to deserve this?" (17:18). Elijah springs into action! He takes the initiative and cries out to Yehovah to bring the boy back

to life – and the Lord does it! The widow's declaration helps me understand what is possibly going on behind this event, "Now I know you are a man of God and the Lord's word from your mouth is true" (17:24). Was the Lord declaring His reality to a woman in "enemy territory"? After all, Jesus steps out of the land of Israel for a time (which we will see when we get there) and shows His Father's love and grace to a Gentile woman, that's very reminiscent of this event.

Chapter 18 is the MAIN EVENT – The Battle on Mount Carmel! In the third year of the drought, Yehovah finally tells Elijah to ask wicked King Ahab if he's had enough. The drought's been so bad that there's hardly any grazing land left. So Ahab summons his servant, Obadiah. As the text says, Obadiah was a good man, and he protected one hundred of the Lord's prophets from Jezebel's reign of terror and spiritual purge in favor of her gods. Ahab and Obadiah move out in separate directions to find any remnant of forage before slaughtering all the livestock. Elijah meets Obadiah on the road and gives him a message to take back to Ahab, "Elijah is here!" (18:8). Obadiah does so after receiving reassurance from Elijah that his neck isn't on the line.

Elijah and Ahab face each other down like two wrestling champs (18:17). I love what they say to each other. It's so blunt and trash-talky. "Ahab said to him, 'Is that you, *the one ruining Israel?*' He (Elijah) replied, '*I have not ruined Israel, but you and your father's family have, because you have abandoned the Lord's commands and followed the Baals.*'" Bam! In your face, Mr. King!

Elijah throws the gauntlet down. "Ahab. Showdown. Mount Carmel. Me vs. 450 Baal prophets and 400 Ashtoreth prophets. You in?" (18:18). Remember, it was Jezebel who purged Yehovah's prophets first. It's time for a bit of payback.

So everyone gathers at Mount Carmel's summit – Elijah, Ahab, the pagan prophets, and the compromised people. Elijah asks a crucial question, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, follow him" (18:21). Sadly, the people have become so used to idolatry they can't decide which God/god is better. Elijah, who thinks he's the only Yehovah prophet left, sets the conditions of the match, "Two bulls and two altars, one for Yehovah and one for Baal, but no fire. Instead, the God/god who is the real one will ignite His/his sacrifice. Deal?" The match begins.

First, it's Baal's prophets. They do their thing. From 9 am until noon, they cry out to Baal and dance around his altar to provoke a response. Nothing. Nothing but Elijah's mocking that starts at that time, "Shout loudly, for he's a god! Maybe he's thinking it over; maybe he has wandered away; or maybe he's on the road. Perhaps he's sleeping and will wake

up!" (18:27). I have to let you in on a little secret in the Hebrew text. The phrase, "maybe he's wandered away," implies, "maybe he's not answering because he's busy relieving himself!" Hilarious trash-talk! Now Baal's prophets' resort to extreme measures. They cut and slash themselves. Maybe human blood (a symbol of human sacrifice) will get Baal's attention.

Baal's prophets give up at the time of the "evening sacrifice" (3 pm) after six hours of trying to get their worthless god to respond. Likely from blood loss. Now it's Elijah's turn. What does he do? He rebuilds the altar with twelve stones representing the twelve sons of Israel (a slap at the north-south division caused by idolatry and cemented by politics). He sets the sacrifice on the wood and repeatedly soaks it to make it difficult for anyone but God to light the offering. Then he steps up and utters one of my most beloved prayers in the Bible, "Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today let it be known that you are God in Israel and I am your servant, and that at your word I have done all these things. 37 Answer me, Lord! Answer me so that this people will know that you, the Lord, are God and that you have turned their hearts back" (18:36-37).

In an instant, fire falls from heaven and completely reduces the sacrifice, wood, and altar to ashes. Water? What water? That's gone, too. Why is fire from heaven significant? Because fire from heaven in *lightning*! Remember that Baal is the "storm god." Ummm, no. Yehovah is. Baal was impotent to "send the fire." But Yehovah could. In one lightning strike, Yehovah made His rather stunning point, and it happens to be the meaning of Elijah's name – "Yehovah is God!" As the people chanted Elijah's name, they simultaneously chanted Yehovah's supremacy over Baal. *Yehovah rules, Baal drools!*

Now for the payback. It's time to eliminate the pagan priests from Yehovah's territory, and the crowd takes them down to the mountain base and slaughters them (18:40). Afterward, Elijah turns to Ahab and tells him to beat his feet back to his palace because the true God of the Storm is about to send a whopper now that His people have returned to Him. Elijah prays until the storm appears, then supernaturally races Ahab's chariot back to the town of Jezreel some miles away. Wow, I need to take a breath after all that! Elijah wins, right? Yes, he does. But then, in chapter 19, Jezebel goes after him in a murderous rage for killing her prophets, *and the man of God who just saw the tremendous power of God turns tail and flees from her in fear*. Rather than repent or fear for her own life, Jezebel puts a contract hit on Elijah. Don't you think she would be just a bit afraid of the Lord "dropping a house" on her, too? She obviously has no fear of Yehovah and is only concerned about her "team." After all, she's not a native Israelite but a pagan foreign transplant.

Why did Elijah run from Jezebel after the Lord dropped a lightning bolt from heaven and obliterated a water-soaked sacrifice and altar of stone? Imagine how Elijah feels. He saw one of the most jaw-dropping acts of God's power, yet the leaders led no national repentance. Just the opposite, Jezebel swore to kill him. Perhaps this wicked woman was unstoppable! Regardless, even after three intense years of drought and a power encounter with the Lord, the northern kingdom of Israel would have no quick turnaround. Worse yet, even though the conduits of Jezebel's idolatry are dead – the prophets of Baal – there are still the prophets of Ashtoreth and the source of the infection herself alive and spewing demonic defilement. King Ahab saw the divine explosion on Mount Carmel, but he's unable (or unwilling) to stop Jezebel. I guess we know who is in charge of the family!

Elijah runs in fear (19:3). While most of his ministry is in the northern kingdom, Elijah runs toward friendly territory, Judah. He falls exhausted on the ground under a broom tree and asks God to take his life. Aha! Elijah is disappointed and emotionally crushed after such an incredible victory, followed by no national repentance by the leaders. All he received was a death threat! In his eyes, all his work and responsibility have failed. Does the Lord talk to Elijah? Nope. Isn't it interesting that the Lord ministers to a depressed person with rest and nourishment? Elijah has a long trek to make, and his merciful God takes care of his immediate needs personally!

Once refreshed, Elijah starts for Mount Horeb, another name for the famous Mount Sinai (19:8). After a day's rest, the Lord speaks to his faithful prophet. I love what Yehovah says to him, "Hey! What are you doing here?" Duh! The Lord knows Elijah is running for his life. I've often found God asks questions not for Him to learn something but for us to learn something. What's Elijah's response? "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Armies, but the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are looking for me to take my life" (19:10). What does that sound like to you? A bit of a pity party, right? But is Elijah *really* the only one left? No! Obadiah had hidden 100 prophets in two caves to keep them out of the murderous Jezebel's grasp (18:4). But this "I've done as much as I've could and no one else is left" is discouragement and depression talking. All that work for nothing! But God has something to show Elijah. God shakes the whole mountain with a terrible wind, an earthquake, and a supernatural fire – the same things that happened centuries earlier when Israel gathered at the mountain to make a covenant with God to be His people (Exodus 19:16-19). Yehovah met his prophet at the place of Israel's covenant birth.

While Israel may forget their covenant King, He would never forget them, and neither would the covenant be erased. Israel would be disciplined but never abandoned. After

that, He again asks Elijah what he is doing at Mount Sinai, but in a whisper (19:13). What is Yehovah trying to teach Elijah?

Possibly this: Yehovah is not just the God of the spectacular, He is the God of the still small voice, and His voice is more powerful than any supernatural display of power. If Elijah asked for God's powerful judgment on His wayward people, the Lord would not do that, for He wouldn't be in any of it. That's not how the Almighty God wanted to do it. *Instead, the Lord's work would continue through His word, "Is not My word like fire" — says the Lord — "and like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces?"* (Jeremiah 23:29).

Elijah had called for drought and its release by the Lord's word. He had called down lightning/ fire and called for the fire of national revival. And yet, it wasn't an immediate turnaround. Just like the growing cloud of rain that came in response to his work, the Lord's work would continue, slowly and steadily, to reach out to His people and call them back. Elijah's narrowed vision missed seeing this part of Yehovah's loving and gracious work.

But now, Elijah's ministry is drawing to a close. The Lord will continue his work through three other servants, one Gentile king (Hazeal), one Israelite King (Jehu), and one Israelite prophet (Elisha). With those three, the Lord will go after Israel's idolatry. Yehovah will leave 7,000 who have stayed faithful to Him (19:18).

Elijah finds Elisha and commissions him for the work (19:19).

INSIGHT

An enemy counter-attack often follows spiritual victories. If you're going to stand against unrighteous authority (spiritual and non-spiritual), expect the enemy authorities to not go down without a fight. Even during times of revival, where God's presence is often very tangible, there's no guarantee of sinlessness. Spiritual victories are prime times of great temptation.

April 6 : Scriptures 1 Kings 20-22

SUMMARY

In today's reading, chapter 20 begins with an international incident. Ben-hadad of Aram (modern-day Syria) picks a fight with Israel's King Ahab. What's going on is simple. Ben-hadad attacks Israel because he thinks he's the stronger king. He makes a play to put Israel under his thumb as a vassal king, hoping that Israel wants to avoid a fight. Ben-hadad demands tribute and hostages from King Ahab to "ensure" their relationship. King Ahab agrees to the terms. But Ben-hadad pushes harder. He'll send emissaries to personally rummage through his royal household to take all they want (20:6). In other words, for this to be accomplished, Ahab would have to surrender the entire city, resulting in utter defeat, not a settlement. Ahab realizes too late that he spoke foolishly. Seeing how bad this will be, King Ahab "graciously" turns Ben-hadad down.

And the trash-talking starts. Ben-hadad threatens to grind Ahab's city to dust, and Ahab mocks him for counting his chickens before their hatched (20:11). The war starts.

One of Yehovah's prophets appears and gives Ahab the word, "This is what the Lord says: 'Do you see this whole huge army? Watch, I am handing it over to you today so that you may know that I am the Lord'" (20:13). Well, alright then. Ahab follows the Lord's word and puts the hurt on Ben-hadad and his forces (20:13). Stung by his defeat, Ben-hadad plans to try the following spring again, but Yehovah gives King Ahab a heads-up (20:22), so he can strengthen his forces.

Ben-hadad's strength was his chariots, and they work well on the plains but not so much in the hills. He figures that Israel won because Yehovah is a god who prefers hilly terrain. If the Arameans can draw the battle to the valley, they'll be sure to win. That's a big nope! Israel again smashes the Arameans despite the overwhelming odds against Israel. King Ben-hadad is reduced to begging for his life through his emissaries. (20:32). The language used here is important. King Ben-hadad calls himself King Ahab's "servant," positioning himself as a vassal king, inferior to King Ahab. King Ahab calls King Ben-hadad "my brother" out of foolish mercy. Calling Ben-hadad "brother" means Ahab is proposing an equal partnership. Big mistake! The emissaries jump on this. They bring Ben-hadad out, and Ahab seals the treaty with his new covenant (treaty) partner involving exchanging cities and economic cooperation. Good, right? Wrong!

The Lord has something to say about ungodly alliances, and Yehovah uses a prophet to create a story to illustrate Ahab's disobedience. In fact, the whole section at the end of chapter 20 is about obeying God's word. A prophet tells a fellow prophet to hit him with

a sword to make it look like the first prophet was in the recent battle. When the second prophet refuses to obey, the first prophet declares the second prophet's death by a lion. It happens. The first prophet does it again, and this time the person obeys. Now on to King Ahab.

As a pretend soldier, the prophet tells of his failure to obey his superior and the cost of disobedience. King Ahab agrees. The prophet rips off the bandage, revealing who he is, jabs his finger in Ahab's face, and declares, "This is what the Lord says: 'Because you released from your hand the man I had set apart for destruction, it will be your life in place of his life and your people in place of his people'" (20:42). King Ahab returns to Samaria very grumpy.

Chapter 21 begins with King Ahab pouting in his palace. He wants his neighboring subject's plot of land for a vegetable garden, but the guy won't agree despite Ahab's generous offer. Why? Family land was essential in ancient Israel, and it's a family's claim to the Promised land, and it was not to be sold off permanently to another family or person (21:3). So, Ahab goes into his bedroom and pouts (21:4).

But the always lovely and evil Jezebel comes up with a plan. "What's the matter, pooky? You're the king; act like it, and use your power of eminent domain." Jezebel sets up a false accusation against Naboth in King Ahab's name (notice she keeps her part out of the equation) and unleashes the town's elders to stone Naboth (21:13). With the refusnik out of the way, Ahab waltzes in to take Naboth's land. How convenient! As if the Almighty God wasn't watching the whole evil, covetous, lying, murderous plan unfolds.

This time God's judgment against an Israelite king's family line comes through the prophet Elijah, the same Elijah who had run from Jezebel a few chapters back. As is often done in the Bible, it will be a "measure for measure" punishment. King Ahab will die, and the dogs will lap up his blood in the same place the dogs lapped up the unjustly killed Naboth's blood was spilled (21:19). When Elijah meets King Ahab, he pronounces God's decree, "You gonna die, Ahab! You and all your male kin are goners just like I did to Jeroboam's male kin (Israel's first dynasty)." Not only will dogs and birds eat Ahab's dead male offspring, but the dogs will eat Jezebel's body, too.

This judgment is a gruesome punishment from the Lord. First, it's an insult for a dead body not to be buried, exposing it to the animals and the elements. As you Cruise through the Bible, you'll see this kind of punishment often declared by the prophets. Second, dogs are "unclean" animals that were often wild, vicious scavengers, not tame, loyal house pets. To be eaten by dogs is a particularly despicable way for one's body to be disposed

of. King Ahab and Jezebel get the worst treatment because they were the worst sinners. “Still, there was no one like Ahab, *who devoted himself to do what was evil* in the Lord’s sight, because his wife Jezebel incited him. He committed the most detestable acts by following idols as the Amorites had, whom the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites” (21:25-26). Much of King Ahab’s immorality was caused by Jezebel’s incitement. Bad company corrupts good morals, right?

But surprise, surprise! King Ahab gets the message. He’s not all bad like his despicable wife, and at least he repents. Because of his repentance, the Lord will delay the family elimination curse until the next generation (21:29).

And now, the end of 1 Kings arrives with chapter 22, a major battle, King Ahab’s downfall, and two new kings of Judah and Israel. While we may see this alliance between Judah’s King Jehoshaphat and Israel’s King Ahab and their battle against the king of Aram over a city as the main event, it’s really God’s plan to eliminate Ahab.

When Jehoshaphat pays a neighborly visit to Ahab, the king of Israel proposes a military adventure to take back Ramoth-Gilead, which belonged at that time to the king of Aram. Jehoshaphat’s open to the idea but wants the Lord’s counsel about their plan. So, Ahab calls in about 400 prophets who agree that the two kings should go to war. But Jehoshaphat’s not buying it. Why? There’s not one of Yehovah’s prophets in the bunch. Remember that Jezebel tried to eliminate all of Yehovah’s prophets? The only ones left were in hiding, except for the prophet, Micaiah.

It’s funny that the messenger told Micaiah to agree with what Ahab’s pagan prophets were saying, and he likely knew any disagreement meant the prophet’s demise. As is standard operating procedure with Yehovah’s genuine prophets, Micaiah says he can only speak what the Lord tells him. When Micaiah arrives, the pagan prophets are having a hoot-nanny over going to war with Aram. Get this – Micaiah casually agrees with the rest of the pagan prophets, “March up and succeed. The Lord will hand it over to the king” (22:15). The fact that Ahab calls Micaiah out shows that he *knows* Micaiah will be the dissenting voice because Yehovah always disagrees with the pagan gods. “Okay,” says Micaiah, “If you want the truth, here it is: Israel is leaderless. Furthermore, your prophets are lying to you, every last one of them. And the reason they’re lying is that Yehovah caused them to lie to lead you into battle where Yehovah will get you killed.”

Despite Micaiah’s warning, Ahab and Jehoshaphat provoke a war. To avoid the Lord’s prophecy, King Ahab disguises himself, but to no avail. An errant archer’s shot hits him squarely between the armor plates, mortally wounding the wicked king. King Ahab is set

upright in his chariot to watch the Israelites lose the battle while he loses his life (22:35). In concert with the Lord's word, Ahab is brought back to Samaria and buried, not unburied and eaten by wildlife. And true to God's word, his men wash his chariot at the pool of Samaria, where the dogs lap up his blood and prostitutes bathe in the bloody water.

At the end of this chapter, the Bible camera swings south to Judah to focus a bit on Jehoshaphat. We'll get a much bigger picture of this righteous king in the book of Chronicles. Suffice to say. He's good King Asa's son, is thirty-five years old when he ascends the throne and reigns for twenty-five years. While he tried to keep the Judahites on the straight path, they still practiced idolatry in the high places. The camera swings up north to focus on King Ahab's successor, Ahaziah, who was another in the line of Israel's wicked, idolatrous kings. He lasts only two years. Congratulations! You've reached the end of 1 Kings. Now let's move into 2 Kings!

INSIGHT

Just because there is a unified answer from the false prophets, it is still a unified lie. A single true word from the Lord trumps all other voices even if they speak the same lie and truth trumps numbers. Furthermore, there comes a point when those who reject the Lord are only open to lies and not the truth. Therefore, the Lord will let them enjoy all the lies they want. The most dangerous rejection of the truth is rejecting the truth of God's existence and a stubborn refusal to believe His word.

"For God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (WHY?), since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. (In other words, people can get a baseline testimony of God's existence simply by observing His creation. An artist is proved by his work of art.) As a result, people are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, four-footed animals, and reptiles" (Romans 1:18-23).

April 7 : Scriptures 2 Kings 1-3

SUMMARY

2 Kings covers the period of about 853 B.C. through the Northern Kingdom's exile by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. (131 years) and then to Judah's exile by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (136 years after Israel's exile).

Here's a quick synopsis to start chapter 1. King Ahab's successor, Ahaziah, falls and critically injures himself. He wants to know if he will live and sends messengers to ask a pagan god about his prospects. Elijah the Tishbite intercepts them and scolds them with one of the best lines in the Bible, "What? You have to ask a stupid idol like there's no God in Israel to ask? Well, forget that. Yehovah, the only God, will give you the truth. You're going to die" (1:3-4 paraphrased). When Ahaziah finds out it was a "hairy man with a leather belt," he knows it was Elijah, Yehovah's prophet. By the way, *this is a critical description to remember! It will come in handy when we get to John the Baptist. Trust me.*

Ahaziah sends a detachment of soldiers to arrest Elijah. The captain approaches Elijah with disdain, and you can just hear the sarcasm in his voice, "*Man of God* (*snort*), get your behind down here right now." Elijah's reply is calm and relaxed. "Hey, if I am a *man of God*, then may fire fall and reduce you to ashes." BAM! A pile of ashes, fifty-one men deep. I guess Elijah *is* a man of God. Ahaziah sends another team. Same thing. The third team has an intelligent leader. He sees the piles of ashes and humbly and respectfully approaches the prophet. "Please, sir. If you will, please come with me... and don't fry my guys and me!" Why does the angel of God allow Elijah to go with this captain and not the other two? Because the captain's attitude proves Elijah will be safe and in good hands!

When Elijah reaches the evil king, he says the same thing. "You're done." And Ahaziah dies. Since he had no son, a man named Joram (also known as Jehoram in the book of Chronicles) ascends the throne.

Chapter 2 covers the prophetic leader transition from Elijah to Elisha. It's time for Elijah to "pass the mantle," i.e., transfer everything to his God-ordained successor (which is where we get this expression). Elijah heads off to where the transfer will occur – across the Jordan River, opposite Jericho (Go ahead. Take a few minutes to look at your Bible map. I'll wait.) Interesting, this is the same area where Moses transferred his leadership to Joshua. What Moses started, Joshua completed, and what Elijah started, Elisha will complete.

Along the way, various groups of prophets warn Elisha about what he already knows, proving Elisha is already in the leadership position because he knows before they tell

him. When Elijah and Elisha reach the Jordan River, Elisha takes off his outer garment (the mantle, a symbol of his office) and strikes the water, causing it to part. Gee! Just like Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea. The two cross and reach their destination.

Elijah allows Elisha one request, and Elisha asks for a double portion of the Holy Spirit that Elijah has. An odd request, right? Not really. In biblical terms, Elisha declares he is like a firstborn son to a father. He wants to “inherit” Elijah’s ministry of calling Israel to repent and return to the God they’ve forsaken (2:9). That will, of course, require the same presence and power of God to accomplish, perhaps in a greater measure. That’s tough for Elijah to grant (because it’s up to God, really), but Elijah understands that if Elisha sees him depart, God has granted Elisha’s request.

Suddenly, a fiery chariot swoops out of the sky, scoops Elijah up and flies off. Elijah’s mantle falls to the ground (2:11). Elisha is stunned when he sees this and cries out, “My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel!” (2:12). What does this mean? Elisha must have been overwhelmed by the experience. First, he is losing his spiritual father and Israel’s greatest prophet. Second, Elisha is as close to the physical presence of the Lord as he has ever experienced up to that point. That would be mind-blowing all on its own! Third, having seen Elijah taken up (the chariots and horsemen of Israel), the Lord had granted his request to succeed Elijah. He picks up Elijah’s mantle, walks to the Jordan, strikes the water, and asks, “Lord, are you with me?” The water parts and settles the question.

The prophets think (erroneously) that maybe Elijah isn’t really gone. Even though Elisha knows the truth, they doubt him and send out a search party, but they return after three days of fruitless searching. “I told ya,” Elisha says (2:18).

Now, prophet-type things kick into gear. Elisha stays in Jericho for a while. The city men tell him the water’s gone bad, to which Elisha replies, “Throw a bowl of salt in it.” They do, and it fixes the water. Here’s an excellent side note that I found out when I traveled to Israel. Today, there’s only *one* water source in the city, and therefore, it’s the same one Elisha fixed. Talk about the Bible coming alive! If you haven’t traveled to Israel, you need to go to get this same “WOW!” experience.

Finally, Elisha leaves Jericho and heads toward the town of Bethel on the south edge of the northern kingdom of Israel. As he reaches the idolatrous village (the site of Jeroboam’s golden calf idol), a bunch of snotty brats mock him because he’s the prophet of a competing God. Age doesn’t seem to matter in this case. Elisha curses them for their

abuse, and they're torn to shreds by two female bears (2:24). Even though it's harsh, it's reassuring that God sticks up for his people, right?

Now the Bible camera pans from the prophet of Israel to the new king of Israel, Joram (3:1). He reigns for twelve years, and his assessment is funny to me. "He was bad, but not as bad as his dad and mom because he took down *one* idol image." Wow! Big whoop! But sadly, he held onto the same things begun by Jeroboam.

Look! Another battle! King Mesha of Moab rebels against King Joram of Israel. Hey, why not? The kingdom has a new king, and King Mesha tests the kid to see if he's tough enough to demand Moab's tribute. King Joram invites Judah's King Jehoshaphat to join him against the upstart King Mesha (3:7). King Jehoshaphat accepts and the two kings, along with the king of Edom, set out to spank their "cousin" kingdom. Remember, Judah and Israel were descendants of Jacob, Edom was Esau's (Jacob's brother) descendants, and Moab was Lot's descendant, Abraham's nephew. Yes, it's an inter-family squabble again.

After a weeklong trudge through hot and dry terrain, the army is out of water. Jehoshaphat is a smart guy because he goes right to the source. He wants to ask Yehovah what to do. Lo and behold, Yehovah's prophet, Elisha, is with the army! Elisha steps forward and snidely says to King Joram of idolatrous Israel, "We have nothing in common. Go talk to your idols for direction." But because of the other two kings, Elisha agrees to ask the Lord what to do. The Lord tells them to dig ditches in the dried-up riverbed (called a wadi) and promises to fill them with lifesaving water. Oh, and Yehovah will also hand Moab over to them!

As the Lord promised, water flowed down the wadi the following morning and filled the trenches. While the Israelites are refreshing in the channels, the sun rises behind the Moabites encamped to the east. The reddish sunlight makes the water look like spilled blood to the Moabite army. The Moabit army thinks the three armies below turned and attacked each other, so they decide to run down and do a little scavenging. Little do they suspect they're running right into the arms (literally, armaments) of three awaiting ground forces. The battle is so hopeless that the king of Moab sacrifices his next-in-line-to-the-throne son, which infuriates his army against the Israelites, Judahites, and Edomites. Only this stops the onslaught. Brutal, huh?

INSIGHT

Okay, what's up with Elisah calling for two she-bears to rip apart playful young boys? Can't Elisha take a little teasing? Are all bald guys this sensitive? As you might guess, there's much more to this than you might think.

First of all, who were these young lads? The Hebrew word used for the "boys" (*na'ar*) has a wide range of interpretations. It always refers to a male, but the age ranges from an infant to a young boy. It's used to mean soldiers, servants, and even a royal official. The word can also carry the nuance of rebellion, hinting that these young men could have been ruffians mocking Elisha after returning without Elijah (from NKJV Study Bible). The word for "go up" is the same word used in verse 1 about Elijah "taken up" (*alah*). It's possible that these insolent young men were mocking Elisha by saying, "Why don't you ascend out of here, too, baldy!" Not knowing they weren't talking to just any prophet, but Elijah's successor, the new lead prophet in Israel, was a wrong move!

Was their punishment just? Let's look at this seriously and in context. This event happened in Bethel, the southern seat of idolatry for the northern kingdom, Israel. Here, King Jeroboam set up a golden calf idol and began to lead Israel away from the Lord. Idolatry and blasphemy are not a joking matter to Yehovah. So here we have Yehovah's newly-appointed and anointed lead prophet arriving at idolatry ground zero, where insolent young men appear and tell him to get lost. Elijah pronounces the curse in the Lord's name. The Lord backed it up by sending two she-bears to shred the abusers for demeaning Elijah's passing or abusing Yehovah's official representative. At such a critical juncture in Israel's national life, swaying between idolatry and death or repentance and life, this was a wrong choice for the abusers.

When we read the story, most think it was a few young boys. On closer examination, this was a crowd of young men, forty-two of whom paid the price for harassing Elisha. Did the Lord sufficiently em-bearness the 42 guys? (Sorry. The pun was too good to resist.)