

April 8 : Scriptures 2 Kings 4-6

SUMMARY

In 2 Kings 2:9, Elisha requested a double portion of the Holy Spirit upon his master, Elijah, before the fiery chariot whisked Elijah away. Elisha saw Elijah depart, received Elijah's mantle (outer cloak), and split the Jordan River to cross undampened. Yes, Yehovah did answer Elisha's request. Although they are all remarkable and significant, Yehovah produces more recorded miracles through Elisha than Elijah. Chapter 4 records many of those miracles, and you'll even find a couple that Jesus later performed himself. Let's have some fun and look at those miracles as we go *Cruisin' Through The Bible* today.

Elisha and the widow's oil (4:1-7). The main characters of this miracle are a poverty-stricken woman and her sons, and the miracle Elisha performs is providing life for them through miraculous financial support. God looks after the vulnerable and helpless, and His Torah explicitly commands His people to protect widows and orphans. Furthermore, how people treated widows and orphans showed how righteous a person was. A woman without a husband often needed encouragement and support from the community where she lived, especially if she had no sons to step into their father's place as the provider. In this case, because she couldn't pay off her debt, her sons would be taken and worked until the debt was paid, but then she would be caught short until it was. Yes, we could look at Elisha as the "provider," but Yehovah himself provides. Israel's God would be her Protector/Provider! He miraculously provides enough oil to pay off the debt and provide for the family for an extended time.

Next, Elisha prophesies a son for a Shunammite woman and raises him from the dead. (4:8-37). The main characters are a husband and wife, and the miracle provides life – a son and resuscitating the son. A well-off woman from Shunem (in the Jezreel Valley) offers hospitality to Elijah. Hospitality is another Torah virtue besides caring for widows and orphans. The woman and her husband recognize Elisha as a man of God and decide to build an additional room on the flat roof of their home, a 2nd story bungalow for Elisha. Out of gratitude, Elisha offers to bless her back. Since she has a well-off husband and lives in a caring community, there's really nothing she needs. But Elisha's servant, Gehazi, notes her husband is old, and she has no son to care for her should he die. Do you see the connection between this account and the previous one? Elisha promises her a son (under the inspiration of the Spirit), and within a year, she has a bouncing baby boy. But then comes a twist! The boy falls ill and dies in his mother's arms. She lays the boy on the bed in Elisha's room and quickly rides to Elisha for help. She refuses to tell what happened to Gehazi, perhaps out of fear of being turned away. She presses into the source – Elisha. Only then does she spill her tears, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn't I

say, 'Do not lie to me?'" (4:28). Her love for her son and hope for a future are dashed in one illness. Elisha sends his staff ahead of his physical presence as a means of healing, hoping that it will save the newly deceased boy. It doesn't work, so Elisha throws himself into intercession, and the boy recovers. Another woman in distress is comforted!

And now, another miracle! The main characters are the company of prophets living in the city, and the miracle is how Elisha "fixes" dinner for his troupe. Elisha returns to Gilgal (not the city on the Jordan River valley, but another Gilgal in central Israel) and finds that a "helpful" cook has spoiled the dinner. He collected unknown stew ingredients that poisoned the stew. Usually, they could have made another batch, but there was a famine in the land (4:38). Not one to waste food, Elisha gets the idea to add flour to the pot, and the flour additive "heals" the deadly meal (4:41).

Next, a man arrives from Baal-shalishah with loaves of barley bread "from the first bread of the harvest." If you've been tracking with me, you know by now that this means it's Springtime. Elisha commands the man to feed the prophets with the twenty loaves. "What? Am I to set this before a hundred men?" (4:43). No problem. Elisha multiplies the bread! Here's the cool part. You've heard of Jesus multiplying bread to feed multitudes not once but twice? Well, Elisha did it first, but Jesus did it magnitudes greater (John 6)! And like Jesus, Elisha's "multitude" of one hundred men had food leftover.

As we move into chapter 5, the miracles just keep on a-comin'! Naaman, one of Aram's most esteemed commanders, has leprosy and his servant girl tells him about a prophet in Israel who has a reputation for doing great things (5:3). Desperate times call for desperate measures. Naaman asks his king for a pass to visit their neighbor to seek help from Elisha. Naaman arrives on Elisha's doorstep with quite the entourage with the king's permission. The funny thing is Elisha doesn't even bother to grace Naaman with his presence. He simply sends word for the formidable commander to dunk himself seven times in the Jordan River. You can tell Naaman's real issue is his pride which is wounded by being treated so casually. Thank God for humble servants. Naaman's servant convinces him to follow Elijah's leprosy treatment protocol, and behold! Naaman's skin becomes like a young boy's skin. He returns as a "true believer" in Israel's God. I love his response, "I know there's no God in the whole world except in Israel" (5:15). Bingo! Miracles bear testimony to the One True God. After Elisha refuses his gifts of gratitude, Naaman asks for a gift of Israel's soil. Why? The dirt from Israel would serve as a constant reminder of his healing and who gave it to him. And since gods were often associated with the locale of their influence, perhaps this also was a way for Naaman to picture "bringing Yehovah back" to his home. Naaman also asks for Yehovah's

forgiveness when he is obligated to bring his king into his foreign god's temple, which Elisha says Yehovah grants.

But that's not the end of the story. Elisha's servant, Gehazi, gets a little greedy. He cooks up a scheme to get a "taste" of the reward by lying to Naaman and hiding his ill-gotten gain from Elisha. Right! Like you can hide anything from God's preeminent prophet! The sad news is Gehazi can enjoy it, but only as a leper. "You want Naaman's treasure, Gehazi? Then you can have his skin disease as well!" Gehazi's greed led to his expulsion from the Lord's presence, while Naaman's humility brought him healing and Yehovah's grace!

And still, the miracles don't stop! In chapter six, Elisha starts his tool reclamation ministry (6:1-7). The company of prophets has grown large enough to need more space. So with Elisha's permission and supervision, they all trek down to the Jordan River to cut wood for a new ministry headquarters. Oops! An iron ax head falls off its handle and into the Jordan. Not good. Iron is a valuable commodity, and it was borrowed to boot. Why is that a big deal? The one who lost the ax would have to make restitution to the owner. If it was expensive and the prophet had no money, he would have to indenture himself to work off the debt, like the widow's sons had to pay off the family debt at the beginning of our reading. God's law often speaks of making restitution for articles (including animals, objects) that are lost, stolen, broken, or killed while in the hands of a borrower. "When a man borrows an animal from his neighbor, and it is injured or dies while its owner is not there with it, the man must make full restitution. If its owner is there with it, the man does not have to make restitution. If it was rented, the loss is covered by its rental price" (Exodus 22:14-15). The Lord extends His mercy to the man. This miracle helps out the unfortunate prophet and the unknown lender. This short account demonstrates that the Lord has compassion for those who encounter even insignificant or common life problems.

But now we hit a super big problem – the Arameans attack Israel. But no worries. Israel has a secret weapon – a prophet who reveals secrets. Every time the king makes a move, Yehovah tells Elisha, and the prophet relays it to the king. He can't catch a break with the all-seeing God on Israel's side! So he decides to go after Elisha, the master of divine military intelligence (6:14). Imagine being Elisha's servant (likely Gehazi's replacement) going to bed and waking up to see the entire town surrounded by a massive enemy army. Yup, I'd panic, too. "No worries," says Elijah, "Our army is larger." When the Lord opens the servant's eyes, "he saw that the mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (6:17). You got it—the same fiery chariots of heaven like the one who whisked Elijah to heaven. When the Arameans attack, Elisha asks Yehovah to blind

them. And Jehovah opens the eyes of one man and blinds the eyes of a multitude of other men. Then in a stroke of fabulous fun, Elisha, the man they're looking for but unable to see, leads them to the king of Israel. One man captures an entire enemy army! Rather than kill them, Elisha tells the king to treat them with the utmost care, wining and dining the whole bunch. Then they send them home. What a way to fight a war! It says the Aramean raiders no longer went into Israel's territory, probably because they realized they got off easy!

That was Aram. Now Syria attacks Israel and puts them under siege (6:24). It's so bad even the yuckiest food sells for a high price. By the way, dove's dung was a salt-type seasoning, and yes, I think I'm going to barf just writing about this. Oh, wait! The barf factor is about to rise. When the king of Israel went for a walk along the top of a wall, a woman calls out for help. The king says he can't help her but asks what her problem is. It's quite simple, really. She and another woman had agreed to cannibalize their sons, the first woman's son today and the other woman's son the next day. But after eating the first woman's son, the other woman hid hers. It's just not fair! Again, the fact that the women were willing to "eat their future" tells us how bad the famine from the siege was. As you might guess, this distresses the king. It's all Elisha's fault. Hadn't Elisha captured an entire army earlier without anyone firing a shot? What's Elisha waiting for? Since he hasn't acted, the king will act first – by taking Elisha's head (6:31)! The Lord tips off Elisha before the king's messenger arrives, and the elders bar the door to keep him from entering. There's only one person Elisha wants to talk to about the siege – the king! And you'll have to wait until tomorrow's Cruisin' Through The Bible to see how this cliff-hanger resolves—just kidding! You can read it now. I'll catch up with you tomorrow!

INSIGHT

Flask = small container. The widow had to enlarge what she could receive by amount and number to receive more from the Lord. Does the Lord sometimes ask us to stretch ourselves and our resources to contain tremendous growth and blessing? Jesus often uses just what we have on hand and then magnifies it. Material limitations never constrain the Lord of our physical world. If we feel that the Lord cannot do something to help us with a need in this life, perhaps we need a faith-lift? When it comes time to step out in faith, step without hesitation or limitation! Let the Lord show you the limit of His intention rather than you pulling up short. You may miss the full blessing.

April 9 : Scriptures 2 Kings 7-9

SUMMARY

Welcome back! And now for the exciting conclusion of Israel's Syrian Seige! Chapter seven begins with Elisha assuring the king that the food price will plummet within twenty-four hours. The king's right-hand man scoffs at the word of the Lord and earns himself a reward. He'll see it but won't eat it (7:2).

Meanwhile, the camera pans to the front gate of Israel's capital city, Samaria. As usual, lepers and other people with skin diseases camp outside the gate as the Torah commands. Four guys with leprosy are caught between a closed city gate and an encamped army. The prospects of a bright future just aren't there. "What the heck," they say. "We'll die in the city, or we'll die at the gate. Let's take our chances with the Syrians. They *might* help us. But what's the worst they can do? Kill us and relieve us of our misery?" (7:4). So the lepers head out for the Syrian camp. But someone else has already been there! Yehovah caused the massive army to hear sounds rather than blind them as He previously did with the Arameans. Man, is He ever messing with the enemy's minds! The four lepers find an empty camp. You can just see them. "Hellooooooo? Anybody home?" Nope. The Lord caused the Syrians to hear a great army coming toward them. They assumed Israel hired the Egyptians and Hittites to whomp on them. So they beat feet out of there, leaving everything behind. And now? **Crickets**

The four lepers start pillaging the camp but realize this is selfish. They need to share the good news and the booty with the whole city! Word gets to the king, but the king of Israel thinks it's a trap! He sends out two teams of men, and what do they find? "They saw that the whole way was littered with clothes and equipment the Arameans had thrown off in their haste" (7:15). With that news, the city people erupt in joy and run out of the gates to plunder the Syrian camp, trampling the king's right-hand man to death. Yes, he heard the news of the food but never ate it. Important biblical safety tip? *Don't scorn a bona fide prophet!*

As we head into chapter 8, there's another famine. Why? Likely because the northern kingdom of Israel hasn't given up her idolatry even after Yehovah once again brought them deliverance (chapter 7). This previous deliverance came because the king of Israel acted in repentance (6:30). Obviously, it didn't stick. Elisha announces another famine, this one more severe than the last, because the Syrian army caused the first one when they cut off Israel's food supply. This time Yehovah announces He'll cut off Israel's food supply for *seven years!* This declaration is a virtual death sentence. Because the Shunnamite woman was such a blessing to Elisha, the prophet warns her to get out of

dodge and find a place of refuge outside the land. She chooses to move from central Israel (the Jezreel valley) to Philistine territory (the Gaza Strip area of today). After seven years, she returns home and goes to the king to ask for her ancestral land back. It just so happens that Elisha's former leprosy-stricken servant was with the king recounting Elisha's marvelous miracles (8:5). What a coincidence, or should I say a "God-incident"? Yehovah has so orchestrated her arrival that she receives her land and seven years of back income from the field's use (8:6).

Palace intrigue once again takes center stage as Syria's Ben-hadad is deposed (assassinated) by his court official, Hazael. Ben-hadad is sick and sends Hazael to ask the visiting prophet, Elisha, if he's going to recover. Elisha says he will, but then something odd happens. Yehovah downloads to Elisha that Hazael will be Aram's next king, and his reign will devastate Israel horrendously (8:12). Though we don't know, I wonder if Elijah had told Elisha about the Lord's selection of himself, Aram's future king Hazael, and Israel's future king Jehu of their role as Yehovah's judgment on Israel? I can imagine Hazael introducing himself to Elisha and Yehovah setting off Elisha's prophetic sensors, bells clanging and lights flashing. Elisha's announcement puzzles Hazael because he's not in line to be Aram's king, and he probably sees little chance for him to ascend the throne. But Yehovah says he's next. Elisha's revelation tells Hazael it will happen. However, the Lord surely doesn't sanction how Hazael works it out – by assassinating his ailing master (8:15). But what do you expect from a pagan king who will set Israel's fortresses on fire, kill their young men with the sword, dash their children to pieces, and rip open their pregnant women?

With Hazael on Aram's throne, two of Yehovah's prophesied three "cleaners" are in place. Through these three (Elisha, Jehu, and Hazael), Yehovah would begin to attack the idolatry in Israel and Judah and strike at its root – Ahab and Jezebel's bloodline. Hazael would deal with Israel as the Lord's chastisement from the outside, and Jehu/Elisha would deal with Israel as the Lord's reformers from within.

Now we turn the camera south toward the leadership change in the kingdom of Judah. Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram, ascends the throne at age thirty-two and reigns until he's forty. He's not the paragon of godliness his father was because, sadly, he married King Ahab's daughter, Athaliah, likely out of an alliance between Israel and Judah. Again, bad company corrupts good morals. It's sad that Ahab and Jezebel's spiritual corruption didn't stay in Israel but spread into Judah. Yet, because of the Lord's covenant promise to David, Yehovah kept the kingship within David's family line. Edom apparently sensed a weak king and successfully rebels, breaking away from Judah's rule.

After Jehoram, King Ahaziah takes Judah's throne, and he's another spiritual corruptocrat. He's twenty-two years old and only reigns for one year. When you read that his mom, Athaliah, was Ahab's daughter and King Omri's granddaughter, it's easy to see why. The sad part of the story is that rather than influencing Ahab's family with righteousness, the Omri/Ahab/Joram (aka Jehoram) clan's wickedness stains Judah, all because Ahaziah's father married into Israel's wicked first family. Think again if you don't believe godly/ungodly leaders matter to a nation. A lot of rot or goodness can infuse into society via its leadership. There's not much said here of King Ahaziah, and more will be revealed in Chronicles. What we read here is the setup for the spiritual cleansing trifecta.

Israel's King Joram and Judah's King Ahaziah join forces to strike Aram's King Hazael (8:28). Joram is wounded and heads to Jezreel to recover. His relative and partner king, Ahaziah, drives to Jezreel to see his wounded relative (8:29). Gee, two wicked kings in one place. What could possibly happen?

Long story short, Elisha sends a messenger to Jehu (likely because Elisha going himself might arouse suspicion) to anoint Jehu Israel's next king and to give him his divine assignment (9:6-10). The new king is to wipe out Ahab's wicked family line utterly. By the way, since the family line extends into Judah's royal line, Judah will also get a house cleaning. When Jehu tells his men what the prophet said, they immediately proclaim him king, and they swear to tell no one to keep the element of surprise (9:15). Jehu rides to Jezreel to kill King Joram, which he does. King Ahaziah of Judah sees what's going on and tries to escape but to no avail (9:27). King Joram's body is dumped on the ground at Naboth's vineyard because Jehu had been with King Ahab when Yehovah's prophetic curse was spoken (9:25-26). The Judahites retrieve King Ahaziah's body and bury him with the kings of Judah. Yes, he was evil, but he was still of David's line.

And now for that awful beast, Jezebel! She gets all dolled up, probably knowing she is about to die and is perhaps making a last-ditch effort to seduce Jehu. No such luck. Two of her male servants throw her out of the tower, and Israel is finally rid of her (9:33). Jehu steps inside for a bit of refreshment after a very productive day. After the meal, King Jehu tells his men to take care of Jezebel's body because she was, after all, a king's daughter (of the Sidonian King Ethbaal). But once again, the Lord fulfills His word. The men are too late. The dogs have already eaten her body, leaving only her skull, hands, and feet. True to Yehovah's word, Jezebel gets a disgraceful death and a humiliating burial – inside the stomach of a pack of hounds. Does this stop the idolatrous rot? Sadly, no. Israel is already too far gone, and idolatry has also taken hold in Judah.

INSIGHT

Jehu was assigned a challenging task. The wound in Israel's body, which caused a severe separation between the northern and southern kingdoms, has allowed in spiritually foreign rot (idolatry) and produced spiritual necrosis (spiritual death). Jehu is Yehovah's hand-selected spiritual surgeon who begins to cut away the dead tissue (Ahab's family and those under the dynasty's influence) and the foreign infection (idolatry). Jehu's work may create the conditions of healing the two kingdoms back into one *IF* Jehu is thorough and follows through with an undivided heart. Sometimes radical steps must be taken to remove what has died in a church body, family, business, or nation and the things that have infected the situation, which has caused division and death. The lesson we will learn is that the work must be completed for the remedy to bring healing and unity. It's painful and requires a loving commitment to see such radical actions have their desired effects.

The best way to prevent spiritual/moral rot from entering a relationship (family, marriage, business, church, even national) is only to pursue godly alliances. How many marriages have exploded because one partner is committed to God and the other isn't? It comes down to the fact that the Holy Spirit and human desires war against each other (Galatians 5:17).

April 10 : Scriptures 2 Kings 10-13

SUMMARY

Chapter 10 commences with Israel's King Jehu on his in-house mop-up operation. The elders in the capital, Samaria, hear that King Joram is dead by King Jehu's hand. Fearing they might be next, they ask for terms of surrender. Jehu asks for the heads of Ahab's male descendants per the Lord's word (10:8). The heads are piled at the entrance to Jezreel to show the people that Ahab's reign is over, the elders of Samaria cooperated with Jehu as the new king, and no one should think about supporting the previous regime. All this, Jehu says, is in accord with what the Lord already prophesied through Israel's esteemed prophet, Elijah (10:10). Next, Jehu eliminates the males of King Ahab's family (10:11), those in Jezreel, relatives of Judah's King Ahaziah (10:14) who married into King Ahab's evil clan, and the rest of King Ahab's male family line in Samaria (10:17).

Even though the grip of Ahab's house is finally broken over Israel and Judah, idolatry still grips the hearts of the leadership and the people. Unless there is a radical heart change, it won't end well. The northern kingdom of Israel will now begin its rapid descent into exile. The southern kingdom of Judah will have its moments of rebellion and faithfulness, but they too will end up in the hands of their disciplining God.

Now that King Ahab's family line is eradicated, King Jehu sets out to purge Israel of Baalism. Through a ruse (10:19), Jehu has all of Baal's priests dress in their garments for a grand worship service. While they are in Baal's temple, Jehu stations eighty executioners outside so that not one priest of Baal escapes (10:25). After that, Jehu removes the Baal idol and turns the temple into a public restroom. Quite the statement, I'd say!

At last, Baal worship is purged from Israel. But that's not the end of Israel's idolatry. King Jehu's actions have only bought Israel more time before judgment falls. Even Jehu is not innocent. He continues to worship the Golden Calf idols Jeroboam set up when the kingdoms split. Yehovah's judgment will fall, but only after Jehu's dynasty has four sons follow him on Israel's throne (10:30).

Because Israel continued her idolatry, Yehovah sets further covenant disciplines and judgments in motion. He allows enemies to start paring off territory from Israel, starting with the land east of the Jordan River. If you remember, that's the region inhabited by the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Menasseh. You know, the tribes that "compromised" because they saw the land as much more favorable than west of the Jordan River. Compromise led to those Israelites getting picked off first by Aram's King Hazael (10:32-

33). However, these tribes were allowed to stay in their land under Hazael's control. But when the Assyrians arrive, it'll be a completely different story! So, Jehu ruled for twenty-eight years, and his son Jehoahaz follows him as Israel's new king.

Meanwhile, Ahab's family is not wiped out entirely. We still have Athaliah, Ahab and Jezebel's daughter, formerly married to the now-deceased King Jehoram of Judah. Since her family line is dead, the vengeful creature aims for David's family line in retribution in chapter 11. Athaliah's sister-in-law, Jehosheba (King Ahaziah's sister), saw what was coming. She scoops up Ahaziah's son (her nephew, Joash) and secrets him away for seven years in the Temple (11:4). The Temple is a perfect hiding place since the idolatrous queen Athaliah would likely not go into Yehovah's Temple to worship. I tell ya, this whole part of the story, from the rise of King Ahab down through Joash's ascension to the throne, would make a great movie or streaming mini-series!

Finally, the day comes when Joash is revealed to Judah as their new King. Of course, this is a tricky situation because Queen Athaliah might want her say in the matter. The High Priest Jehoiada arranges for military ranks to guard the Temple during Prince Joash's inauguration as King (11:5-8). High Priest Jehoiada anoints seven-year-old Joash as Judah's king with everyone in place. Athaliah hears the ruckus and runs to the Temple, straight into the arms of her executioners. They take her out of the Temple precincts and facilitate her exit from her earthly existence. So, what do you do with a seven-year-old king? You appoint a steward to help him grow into his position. Therefore, High Priest Jehoiada becomes King Joash's mentor and protector. The best part of the account is that High Priest Jehoiada renews the covenant between Judah and God and between the king and his people! What follows is a time of great rejoicing and peace. Whew! I'm glad to see that chapter closed in Israel's history!

Joash stays the righteous course as long as his mentor, Jehoiada, is alive to steer him right. The king lives to reign for forty years. But not everything is perfect. In chapter 12, we see the idolatrous high places are still operating (12:3).

Sometime during his early years, King Joash initiates a Temple repair and refurbishment project. After all, the Temple was about 125 years old by King Joash's day. The money that's called for is the money that would typically go toward repairs or undesignated funds they routed toward the repair project. However, by Joash's twenty-third year (thirty years old), the work still hasn't proceeded. King Joash calls the priests on it, a new collection and distribution system begins, and so does the work (12:11-12).

But that darn King Hazael of Aram is still on a tear. He marches from the north of Israel, through Israel, then along Israel's coast, and attacks Gaza. He then turns his gaze to

pillage Jerusalem. King Joash pays him off with his forefather's treasures and averts Hazael's attack on Jerusalem and the Temple (12:18). Sadly, Joash's promising career (as far as we know until we get to Chronicles) is cut short by an assassination (12:20-21). After his death, his son Amaziah becomes king.

Again, the camera switches from south to north, from Judah to Israel. Do you see why it's crucial to have a Kings of Israel and Judah timeline handy? You can probably find one online or perhaps in your Study Bible. While Joash reigns in Judah, Israel gets a new king. "Jehoahaz son of Jehu became king over Israel in Samaria, and he reigned seventeen years" (13:1). Now remember, this is King Jehu's son, the same King Jehu who followed the Lord's word and erased Ahab and Jezebel's family from the earth and did away with Baal worship in Israel. Except he didn't end Golden Calf worship at Bethel and Dan. Because of that, his son and now king, Jehoahaz, "did what was evil in the Lord's sight and followed the sins that Jeroboam son of Nebat had caused Israel to commit; he did not turn away from them" (13:2). Yehovah is ticked off and no good will come of that!

King Hazael attacks Israel again. See? God is hammering Israel from the inside and out to get them to turn away from their idols. But it only works for a short time. Israel turns to God and stays faithful to Him, but only until the enemy is gone (13:5). They turn back to their old ways and get into even more trouble. Hey! Their problem sounds a lot like the struggle many of us go through in our life with the Lord! Israel should have held tight to Yehovah because they didn't have much of an Israeli Defense Force left after Hazael's attack (13:7). Jehoahaz dies after seventeen years of kingship, and his son, Jehoash, succeeds him.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Israel's King Jehoash fails to turn from the old ways (13:11). Not much else is known about him from the book of 2 Kings other than he ruled for sixteen years and battled Judah's King Amaziah. Once he dies, his son Jeroboam (aka Jeroboam II) takes the throne.

But now we backtrack a bit. The prophet Elisha is about to die (12:14), and King Jehoash is with him. Even in his final days, Elisha's ministry is as solid and accurate as when he first began after his mentor, Elijah, was taken up into heaven. At that time, on the east side of the Jordan river, when a fiery chariot swept out of heaven and caught up Elijah the prophet, Elisha's cry was, "O my father, my father, the chariots of Israel and their horsemen." This cry was a declaration of Elisha's deep relationship with his spiritual mentor and grief at his loss. In the same way, he began, Elisha is similarly "sent off" with the same declaration of respect and grief from Israel's half-hearted king, Jehoahaz.

As King Jehoash is grieving, the old prophet has him act out one last prophecy about finally crushing King Hazael of Aram. 1) Firing the arrow out the window = the Lord is on your side against Aram. 2) Striking the ground with the arrows = the number of times King Jehoash was willing (determined) to follow through. His failure to strike more than a few times shows his half-hearted devotion to Yehovah compared to Elisha, who wanted a "double-portion" of the Spirit that his mentor, Elijah, had.

Elisha dies and is buried in a cave tomb. One day, some guys in the countryside see Moabite raiders, so they quickly throw their dead friend into Elisha's tomb. The dead guy comes back to life! Even in death, Elisha is involved in a miracle.

To wrap up our reading, the Lord graciously supports Israel despite their rebellion. King Hazael dies, and his son, Ben-hadad II, comes to the throne. True to the Lord's word, King Jehoash only defeats Aram three times, securing only some of the territory that Israel previously lost.

INSIGHT

Elisha was a whole-hearted prophet of Yehovah, whose desire for a double portion of God's Spirit was granted at Elijah's translation into heaven. Through Elisha's ministry, Yehovah mercifully performed great things on behalf of His covenant people despite their half-hearted devotion. How committed are you to the Lord? Paul tells us, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, *do everything for the glory of God*" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Does that mean in a half-hearted manner or with everything we have? Elijah went up in a blaze of glory. Elisha brought life to people even after he was dead. But Jehoash is only able to defeat his enemy as many times as he half-heartedly struck the floor with the arrows. The problem with the northern kingdom of Israel is their half-hearted walk with the Lord. It was this fault that caused so much trouble for them. Again, I ask, how committed is your heart to the Lord?

April 11 : Scriptures 2 Kings 14-16

SUMMARY

So here's the scorecard at the beginning of today's reading in chapter 14. King Jehoash is Israel's king. King Amaziah (King Joash's son) is Judah's king. With the similarity between names (Jehoash, Joash), you can really see why a chart is necessary to keep track of who was ruling during whose reign.

Amaziah is a good king but not a perfect king. While he walked in his ancestor David's ways, he still allowed the high places to remain. He was twenty-five years old when he became king and ruled for twenty-nine years (dying at fifty-four). As soon as he takes the throne, he kills the men who assassinated his father, King Joash, and as a testimony of his devotion to the Lord's word, he does not punish the assassins' children in retribution (14:6). But King Amaziah has a pride problem, and as the scriptures say, "Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). After King Amaziah puts the hurt on the Edomites (killing 10,000!), he decides he wants to pick a fight with the northern kingdom of Israel and King Jehoash. Perhaps Amaziah was looking at his success against his formidable adversary, the Edomites, and presumed he could make a run at King Jehoash to reunite the divided kingdoms. While an admirable goal, there's no indication the Lord asked him to do so. The Lord promised to reunite Israel and Judah (1 Kings 11:39), but it will be His way and at His time (See Ezekiel 37:15-28).

King Jehoash trash talks back to King Amaziah's provocation with a parable. Here are the elements to help you understand Jehoash's reply: Thistle – Amaziah, Cedar – Jehoash, Daughter – Israel, Son – Judah. Wild Beast – Israel's army. King Jehoash says that Amaziah isn't as strong as he thinks he is. Any attempt to battle Jehoash and Israel would result in Amaziah's and Judah's downfall, "Sooo, just stay home, little king." Well, that goes over like a lead balloon.

The battle takes place on Judah's turf. Amaziah attacks (14:11), fails, is captured, King Jehoash tears down a significant part of the wall that protects Jerusalem (200 yards worth), and grabs a lot of treasure and hostages from the Lord's Temple and King Amaziah's palace (14:13-14). Gee, I guess that didn't go so well for Amaziah. So much for following one's pride.

Israel's King Jehoash dies, and his son, Jeroboam II, takes his place. What became of King Amaziah? We learn more about his fate in Chronicles, but for now, he's back home in Judah and lives fifteen years after King Jehoash's death (14:17). However, some men form

a conspiracy, kill the king in Laish, take his body back to Jerusalem, and King Amaziah's son, sixteen-year-old Azariah (aka Uzziah), becomes king. Azariah is a remarkable king! But we'll read more about him in a bit.

Now let's go back up north to Israel. King Jeroboam II reigns for forty-one years. Not a bad stretch, *except* he's just as idolatrous as his namesake, Jeroboam I, Israel's first king, who got the whole idolatry ball rolling in the first place. However, despite Jeroboam II's faults, Yehovah shows mercy and compassion to his people and delivers them from their oppressors (like He did in the book of Judges). They even recover significant portions of land and cities, like Damascus. But his end comes and his son, Zechariah, takes his place (14:29).

And now we go back south to Judah (are you getting dizzy yet?). 2 Kings 15 gives such a short account of Azariah/Uzziah even though he was just sixteen years old when he became king and ruled for an astounding fifty-two years! Like his father, Amaziah, Azariah gets good marks from the Lord even though the high places remain operating. Chapter 15 skips a lot about this king, and we learn only a little here. Azariah had leprosy and lived in quarantine alongside his son, Jotham (15:5). But the questions we want to ask are, "What were his accomplishments? Why or how did he contract leprosy (or another type of skin disease)?" Don't fret. We'll find out soon enough.

And now we turn north to Israel for the lightning round! We read about a succession of Israel's kings that lead to the northern kingdom's downfall at the hands of the growing Assyrian empire.

King #1 – Zechariah, son of Jeroboam II. He reigned for six months. According to the Lord's word, he was the last of Jehu's sons and the prophesied end of his line.

King #2 – Shallum, King Zechariah's assassin. Wow! He reigns for a whole month until another king-wannabe, Manahem (Menachem), strikes him down (15:14).

King #3 – Menahem, what a peach this guy is! He reigned for ten years and was brutal against those who refused to surrender to his reign. Yeah, you can read the disgusting details for yourself (15:16). And now, the growing Assyrian empire threat makes its debut. King Pul of Assyria invades Israel. But rather than resist him, Manahem makes a deal. He gives King Pul 75,000 pounds of silver to help him crush his opposition. Then King Menahem extracts the payment from his own people. Sounds like modern politics, eh? "Nothing is new under the sun," Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes.

King #4 – Menahem's son, Pekahiah, reigns for just two years, and as the kings before him, there's no change from Jeroboam I's idolatry. Pekah kills Pekahiah and another one bites the dust.

King #5 – Pekah, Pekahiah's assassin, seizes the throne. And now, the full force of the Assyrian empire stabs into Israel's heart. King Tiglath-Pileser sweeps into Israel from the north and northeast, takes a significant part of the land under his control, and begins the final process of Yehovah's covenant punishment against His rebellious people – exile (15:29). This is the beginning of what many people refer to as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Many of these people were deported east and scattered across the Fertile Crescent. Some descendants of the Assyrian Exile are presumed to have been located as far east as India. The B'nai Menashe people (sons of Manasseh) are "a community of people from various Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups from the border of India and Burma who claim descent from one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, with some of them having adopted Judaism. The community has around 10,000 members" (Wikipedia entry, "Bnei Menashe"). Wikipedia goes on to say that their DNA has not provided conclusive evidence of Middle Eastern descent, but "there is enough circumstantial evidence for the chief rabbi of Israel to rule in 2005 that the Bnei Menashe were recognized as part of a lost tribe. After undergoing the process for formal conversion, they will be allowed aliyah (immigration to Israel)," which they have done in recent years.

Now, back to our text. After a twenty-year reign, Hoshea assassinates Pekah and grabs the throne. To place this in perspective, all of this transition from king to king happens during Azariah's/Uzziah's fifty-two-year reign in Judah.

Now we turn back south. Azariah dies, and his son Jotham takes over. Actually, Azariah continues, in a way, since he is quarantined as a leper, and Jotham rules in his stead. Jotham begins his reign at age twenty-five and reigns for sixteen years. Jotham does the same thing as his father – he does well, but the high places still aren't removed. But Judah's covenant violations are coming due, "In those days the Lord began sending Aram's King Rezin and Pekah son of Remaliah against Judah" (15:37). At first, the Lord uses Israel and Aram. Later, the Assyrians threaten Judah with defeat. But it will be the Babylonians who will finish the Lord's discipline against His people, Judah.

In chapter 16, after two good kings and sixty-eight years of godly leadership, a real cad rises as Judah's King – Jotham's son Ahaz. If King Menahem of Israel was a peach, this guy is Steak Diane on a Flamin' Peach. "He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God like his ancestor David but walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even sacrificed his son in the fire, imitating the detestable practices of the nations the Lord

had dispossessed before the Israelites. He sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, on the hills, and under every green tree" (16:2-4). Rampant and repulsive idolatry breaks out all over Judah. So, how long do you think Yehovah will put up with this. Oh, until the next verse.

Aram's King Rezin and Israel's King Pekah attack Judah and set up a siege. During that time, Aram takes back a city on the southern tip of Israel on the Red Sea, known as Eilat today. The only way King Ahaz sees to break the siege is to do a very foolish thing. He bribes King Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria to attack Aram and Israel, and Ahaz makes Judah a vassal kingdom to Assyria. Sure enough, the Assyrian king takes Ahaz up on his offer, attacks Damascus, and kills Rezin. Problem solved, right? Wrong.

Ahaz pays a state visit to the Assyrian king and is impressed with the idol altar in Damascus so much that he wants one just like it. He sends the design to Judah's spiritually compromised priest, Uriah, and asks to have it built by the time he returns (16:10-11). When King Ahaz gets to Jerusalem, he immediately puts his pagan altar to use. But what about Yehovah's Bronze Altar? "Hey, Uriah! Let's put this cool pagan altar front and center. Just move the Bronze Altar to the side, the north side. We'll do our main worship on the pagan altar, but we'll keep the old altar for seeking Yehovah for guidance" (16:15). Yeah, right. As if Yehovah is going to put up with being a second-class God in His own Temple. Can you just feel the static building up? To add insult to injury, Ahaz breaks down the Lord's water carts (Why not? The priests aren't using them for their pagan worship.) and sends the bronze as a tribute to Assyria's king. Then out of deference to Assyria, King Ahaz removes the Sabbath canopy and the king's exterior entrance.

So, Ahaz holds King Tiglath-pileser and the pagan gods in higher esteem than Yehovah, who Ahaz has demoted to a "side" God. Oh, the Lord's anger is building! But there's hope. King Ahaz has a son who will become one of Judah's best kings – King Hezekiah!

INSIGHT

Trendy religion, a bane to covenant faithfulness! Generation after generation has its spiritual innovations and religious trends. Some of these are rediscovered truths in the Bible, such as the truths that ignited the Reformation (the 1500s), the Wesley brothers' Holiness movement (1800s), the Pentecostal movement (early to mid-1900s), the Charismatic movement (1960-70s), and the Messianic Jews/Jewish roots movement (1970s to present). Some of these trends led to false Christian religions like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses or outright pagan spirituality like Eastern religions, the occult, and Scientology. Regardless of how "catchy" or appealing a new religion or spin on the

Christian faith is, the Bible must remain our standard for faith and practice. As Jude wrote in his letter, "Dear friends, although I was eager to write you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write, *appealing to you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all*. For some people, who were designated for this judgment long ago, have come in by stealth; they are ungodly, turning the grace of our God into sensuality and denying Jesus Christ, our only Master and Lord" (Jude 1:3-4).

April 12 : Scriptures 2 Kings 17-19

SUMMARY

There is so much in these three chapters that I really have to keep things concise, or I'll be writing all day! Please bear with me if I just skim the surface, and I'll try to include some good background information for you.

Israel's collapse is now complete! Chapter 17 documents the "before" and "after" of the northern kingdom of Israel's fall and exile. Hoshea becomes Israel's last king. He's a vassal king, which means he's a puppet king who has to pay tribute to his master, the king of Assyria. Not liking that arrangement, Hoshea conspires against Assyria (17:4), a very bad move. Assyria's King Shalmaneser arrests King Hoshea, puts him in prison, invades all of Israel, and besieges the capital, Samaria. After its fall, Shalmaneser gathers the Israelites and deports them to the east into the land of the Medes, on the east side of the Fertile Crescent. It was an ancient country of northwestern Iran, generally corresponding to the modern regions of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and parts of Kermanshah. You know, *far enough away from Israel that the people won't return*. The Assyrians often deported people to other areas to erase nationalism and dissolve ethnic alliances. It was a very effective tool to erase local uprisings after conquering territory.

2 Kings 17:7-20 details what the Israelites did to provoke their covenant King, Yehovah, to expel them from their Promised Land. The crux is in verses 13-15. "Still, the Lord warned Israel and Judah through every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commands and statutes according to the whole law I commanded your ancestors and sent to you through my servants the prophets.' *But they would not listen. Instead they became obstinate like their ancestors who did not believe the Lord their God.* They rejected his statutes and his covenant he had made with their ancestors and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves, following the surrounding nations the Lord had commanded them not to imitate." And so, Yehovah booted them out of their land as He promised.

Then there's a brief recap of the national split that led to this point (17:21-23). What follows is a fascinating account that many Christians don't know about but which plays a significant role in Jesus' day. Not only does Assyria exile nationals from their homeland, but they also "import" other nations into the region, now mostly emptied of its people. Again, this national replacement policy effectively destroys national identities and weakens a country, making it ripe for control. So, Assyria imported "people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim and settled them in place of the Israelites in the cities of Samaria. The settlers took possession of Samaria and lived in its

cities" (17:24). These people are "squatting" on God's land. They don't know Him or care about Him or His land. But Yehovah does. "So the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them" (17:25). Interesting, huh? Therefore, the people figure the "local god" must be angry. They aren't wrong, except for the "local god" part. Yehovah is the *universal* God. So they recall one of the Israelite priests to help the people learn how to serve Israel's God. But while this Israelite priest (or priests) knows about Yehovah, he's compromised by the paganism and syncretistic religion (mixing Yehovah and idol god worship) that led to Israel's demise in the first place. Now there's a stew of beliefs in the north half of Israel. The rest of chapter 17 is God's indictment of their compromise and messed-up faith, "They feared the Lord but also served their idols. Still today, their children and grandchildren continue doing as their ancestors did" (17:41).

How does this relate to Jesus' day in the 1st century? Because Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom. The mixed-race people (some Jews and many Gentiles who intermarried or lived among each other) became the *Samaritans* of Jesus' day. The Judahites (and groups of the other tribes living in the southern kingdom of Judah) will also be exiled. Still, unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians didn't intentionally mix ethnic groups. Therefore, most of the Judahites, who returned from their Babylonian exile in c. 516 B.C., remained "pure-blood" Israelites. Since the majority were of Judah's tribe, they became known as Jews and remained so even though some can trace their lineage to other tribes.

To help orient you, the Assyrian exile was in 722 B.C. and cleared out the northern kingdom of Israel. The main Babylonian exile occurred in 586 B.C. (136 years after Israel's fall) and lasted only 70 years. Got it? Good. And now we turn our attention to the remaining kingdom, Judah.

Chapter 18 introduces us to good King Hezekiah. He takes the throne during the final king of Israel's reign (King Hoshea). He starts when he's twenty-five years old and reigns for twenty-nine years. What makes him unique is he did what none of his predecessors did. Not only did he follow Yehovah's ways, but "He removed the high places, shattered the sacred pillars, and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake that Moses made, for until then the Israelites were burning incense to it. It was called Nehushtan" (18:4). It's disgusting that the very thing God told Moses to create for the peoples' healing in Numbers 21 became an idol that they worshiped. I guess it's not surprising because many Christians even today idolize influential Christian leaders or practices or supposed relics. But Hezekiah just wipes it all away. How refreshing!

Hezekiah remained faithful to Yehovah his whole life (even though he did some foolish things). As a covenant reward for his faithfulness, the Lord prospered and protected King Hezekiah, "The Lord was with him, and wherever he went he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. He defeated the Philistines as far as Gaza and its borders, from watchtower to fortified city" (18:7-8). Israel was not so blessed because of its unfaithfulness. After a three-year siege, Israel fell during King Hezekiah's sixth year in office. Not content with conquering and pillaging Israel, King Sennacherib of Assyria advances on Judah. King Hezekiah is not dumb. He recognizes a much stronger army and attempts a vassal payoff to turn Assyria away (18:14-15). Good, but not good enough. Assyria sends a delegation (18:17) to demand Judah's absolute surrender. The Assyrian delegation's terms? Surrender all, and we'll deport you. Otherwise, you will die after a long siege during which you will be reduced to eating and drinking your own body's waste. Wow! That's a pretty enticing offer!

But then the spokesman for the delegation says some really stupid things. The Assyrian spokesman shakes his fist in Yehovah's face (18:33-35), not realizing that Israel's God holds them in the palm of His hand, and He can crush them at any time. This blasphemy is a direct challenge to Yehovah, and it will not go unanswered.

By the way, Yehovah *did* send Assyria to conquer Israel. When we get to the books of the Prophets (major and minor), we'll see that. But not for Judah at this time. King Sennacherib has overstepped his divine mandate and will pay for it.

Judah's only hope is Yehovah, and Hezekiah knows it. He takes it all right to the Lord (19:1). Chapter 19 is a wonderfully encouraging read! Yehovah stands up for those who stand up for Him. King Hezekiah sends this word to Isaiah, the prophet. "Today is a day of distress, rebuke, and disgrace, for children have come to the point of birth, but there is no strength to deliver them. *Perhaps the Lord your God will hear all the words of the royal spokesman, whom his master the king of Assyria sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke him for the words that the Lord your God has heard.* Therefore, offer a prayer for the surviving remnant" (19:3-4). Yehovah's answer is swift and to the point. "Don't worry. I'll cause him to hear a rumor that will turn him from you. After he's gone, I'll strike him down. No worries" (19:7). And that's precisely what happens. The Assyrian delegation withdraws because their king heard the King of Cush was advancing to fight him. As the delegation leaves, they say, "Yeah, we're leaving. But don't think we won't return. We'll utterly destroy you like every other country we've invaded. Did their gods help them?" (19:11).

King Hezekiah again takes the delegation's threat to the Lord, and again the Lord's word comes to the prophet, Isaiah. "Jerusalem mocks you back! Do you think you're all that and a bag of chips? Well, it was Me, Yehovah, who used you and gave you those victories. I planned this from the start. I made those nations weak before you, Assyria. I've heard you talking smack about Me. For that, I'm going to drag you around and send you back home" (19:21-28). "As for you, Judah, don't worry. You'll survive and thrive because My zeal will make it happen. As for Sennacherib's army, they'll never make it in here. I'll turn them back. I have your back, Judah!" (19:32-34). That night, the Lord slaughters 185,000 people in the Assyrian army. Nothing but dead bodies lying around when everyone wakes up. King Sennacherib goes home and is assassinated. God wins!

INSIGHT

No matter how threatening, intimidating, or awesomely scary our enemy is, we need to focus on the One who can save us in time of need. The enemy will always seek to discourage us and get us to surrender. Why? Because if we submit, we have, in essence, walked out from under the Lord's protection. If we stay tight with the Lord, our enemy will have to go through Him first. And as Hezekiah said, "He only has human strength (or demonic strength), but we have the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles!"

April 13 : Scriptures 2 Kings 20-22

SUMMARY

As chapter 20 opens, Hezekiah faces another threat: a personal one. The Assyrian threat has subsided with King Sennacherib's death, but there are stirrings in the east of another rising power – Babylon. But what does that mean to a person who has just received a death sentence?

Hezekiah contracts a terminal illness, and he calls the prophet Isaiah to ask if there's any hope. Isaiah gives the Lord's word to the king, and it's a big fat no (20:1). With that, Isaiah turns on his heels and walks out. So, what would you do with such news? Some people would resign themselves to the inevitable. Others would do what Hezekiah does – appeal to the King of Life for mercy. Remember that Hezekiah was one of Judah's greatest kings. He remained faithful to the Lord and had done great things to remove idolatry from the land. His faith (trust) in God was admirable, and as we learn from the book of Hebrews, such faith pleases Yehovah, "Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Hezekiah believes the Lord exists, and he diligently seeks Him.

After a brief, intensely heartfelt prayer, the Lord stops Isaiah short at the inner courtyard and commands Isaiah to go back to Hezekiah with a remarkable answer to prayer. King Hezekiah will not only survive his terminal illness, but by the third day, King Hezekiah will be well enough to seek Israel's Ultimate King in His Temple. But wait! There's more! Yehovah will give Hezekiah fifteen more years to live *and* permanently remove Assyria as a threat against Judah. Now *that's* a reward for the one who believes God exists and diligently seeks Him. As a confirming sign, Hezekiah chooses to have the sun's shadow reverse its descent on the Ahaz's Stairway (20:8-10), and it does!

Even though King Hezekiah is a righteous king, it doesn't guarantee that he has excellent foresight or is immune to bad decisions. Word travels about King Hezekiah's illness and miraculous recovery. Remember that rising power to the east, Babylon, I mentioned? The news traveled all the way across the trade routes of the Fertile Crescent (Israel to Iraq today). As was customary, the king of Babylon, Baladan (sounds like a dwarf from *The Lord of the Rings*), sends a delegation, including his son, Merodach-baladan, to bless Hezekiah for his recovery and strengthen international relations. King Baladan sends along with personal letters a gift to Hezekiah. Touched by the king of Babylon's warm regards, King Hezekiah conducts an official tour of, well, *everything!*

The Prophet, Isaiah, sees the delegation leave, asks the king who they were and what they saw, and then drops a terrible word from the Lord on the foolish king. "See all this stuff in your palace and everything else? Well, Babylon's going to return to take it all away along with your offspring. The Babylonian king will make your male descendants eunuchs and force them to serve him in his palace" (20:17-18 paraphrased). Why would this happen, you may ask? Because Babylon will rise as one of the most significant powers in the Middle East. The Babylonian empire will soon crush the Assyrian empire and launch a command and control campaign over the entire region. How will they possibly resist the great treasures their envoys just saw? Remember this word when we reach King Hezekiah's great-grandson, King Josiah, in chapter 22.

As chapter 21 closes, I just want to point out that King Hezekiah takes the news lightly, which amazes me. How could a man shrug his shoulders and say, "Oh well," over information that his descendants will become enslaved? And how can a king do the same when he hears an enemy nation will take all the national treasures? Why didn't the king seek the Lord as intensely as he did during his illness? I think this is the key: *It wasn't going to happen to him.* C'mon, admit it. We care more for ourselves than we do for others. We have an "I hope you get better soon" attitude when someone gets sick. But if we get a hangnail or splinter, it becomes a personal crisis! Yeah, I'm being facetious, but you get the point.

It also strikes me that the oncoming judgment starts with one foolish act – King Hezekiah pridefully shows a seemingly non-threatening nation from "waaaaay over there" all his stuff, like a kid showing his closet full of toys to a new-found friend. One act becomes the rope that draws the Lord's judgment on Judah from the east.

As a side note, if you're ever in Jerusalem, you can walk through Hezekiah's tunnel. Water still flows through it, so you need to do it wearing sandals or water shoes. You need to have a flashlight because Hezekiah cut the tunnel through solid rock, and it's *very* dark. Also, some places are tight, with the ceiling inches from your head, almost claustrophobic. At other points along the way, the ceiling is very high and disappears into the darkness. It's a wonderfully cooling adventure on a hot day in Jerusalem!

Back to our cruisin'! King Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, ascends the throne at age twelve after his father dies at age fifty-four. King Manasseh has a rather lengthy reign of fifty-five years, and that's sad because King Manasseh is an evil, terrible, awful, wicked king. But to be fair, that's the book of Kings' assessment. When we read King Manasseh's story in Chronicles, what's left out of his story in 2 Kings will blow you away! But we're in Kings, so we drive on as we are *Cruisin' Through The Bible*.

It's easy to summarize what Manasseh did wrong spiritually. *Everything*. He did everything he wasn't supposed to do, primarily following the pagan beliefs and practices of the Canaanites and the nations around Judah. There are some highlights (lowlights?) that are particularly terrible. 1) He followed King Ahab's (Israel, Jezebel) way. 2) He built *pagan altars in Yehovah's house (The Temple precincts! What an insult!)*. 3) To add injury to insult (yes, I meant to put it that way), King Manasseh even installed a carved image of Asherah in the Temple (21:7), and Manasseh's idolatry and apostasy led Israel into great sin against Yehovah.

So, the Lord sends one of His prophets to pronounce judgment on King Manasseh and Judah because they've sunk lower than even the Amorites before them. You know, the Canaanite Amorites whose sin was so bad that the Lord used Israel to judge them via *extermination*? Well, guess what's going to happen to Judah? On the Lord's behalf, the prophet declares, "I am about to bring such a disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that everyone who hears about it will shudder" (21:12). To paraphrase the rest, Yehovah's going to use the exact measurement against Judah that He did with the northern kingdom of Israel under King Ahab and will wipe Jerusalem out as He did with Israel's capital, Samaria. All that will remain of Judah's people will be a remnant, and Yehovah will allow Judah's enemies to plunder the city and take the remnant into exile. He'll do it because Judah has sunk so low that they are in a worse spiritual state since the Egyptian exile. Now *that's* bad. To cap it off, King Manasseh is so horrendous he "shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem with it from one end to another. This was in addition to his sin that he caused Judah to commit" (21:16). And he dies.

Does King Manasseh's idolatry die with him? Nope. Wicked King Manasseh's son (Righteous King Hezekiah's grandson), Amon, becomes king at age twenty-two and reigns for two years. He's as bad as his father was. A couple of conspirators assassinate him, and the people kill the conspirators (21:23-24). Wow, what a stunning reign he had.

But after the darkness of two evil kings, God's light dawns! Amon's son Josiah (King Hezekiah's great-grandson) is made Judah's king at eight years old and reigns for thirty-one years (22:1). You can almost hear the sigh of relief. The book of Kings assesses his reign bluntly, "He did what was right in the Lord's sight and walked in all the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn to the right or the left" (22:2). Beautiful!

Ten years later, King Josiah decides the Temple needs some renovation, especially after his father and grandfather's horrible desecrations and damage (22:5). Gee, it sounds like his ancestor, good King Joash (1 Kings 12). Note that not only does King Josiah have integrity, but the builders also have that character trait.

But during the renovation process, something stunning happens! High Priest Hilkiah tells the King's secretary, Shaphan, about a remarkable discovery. The workers have found the Book of the Law (the Temple's Torah scroll). After reading the scroll, Shaphan takes it to King Josiah for his Temple renovation report. He reads it to the king, and Josiah breaks down in distress and grief. He knows precisely what it says, but Josiah doesn't know what it means to their current day. He knows what happened to the northern kingdom because of their idolatry and rebellion against Israel's covenant partner, Yehovah. He's keenly aware of what his ancestors have done to draw Yehovah's wrath, especially as his renovation team is currently removing the idolatrous garbage from the Lord's Temple. He knows trouble is on the way, "... great is the Lord's wrath that is kindled against us because our ancestors have not obeyed the words of this book in order to do everything written about us" (22:13).

He sends his delegation to Huldah, a recognized woman prophet, to get the Lord's word on the matter. Her words are clear and direct. "Yes, disaster is decreed and is on its way. It's inevitable. But because the king humbled himself and grieved over my judgment, I'll hold it off until you've died. You won't see the catastrophe that's coming. You will have peace in your lifetime" (22:16-20 paraphrased). And so, the delegation brings the Lord's response back to King Josiah.

INSIGHT

How about a few insights rather than just one?

When a person begins to seek the Lord, a natural desire grows to rid one's life of things that stand between our relationship with the Lord. Once we remove these blocking things, a person is more spiritually clear to receive the Holy Spirit's refreshing and renewal.

There is such a striking parallel between the renovation of the Temple and the renewal of true worship with Josiah and Israel's spiritual renovation and renewal. Just as the High Priest placed the money into the hands of those workers who would be faithful in the restoration/renewal process, so the Lord placed His most valuable thing, His Word, into the hands of King Josiah, who would be faithful in Israel's restoration, revival process.

Are you feeling spiritually dry and distant? Follow Josiah's example. Identify and remove those things that compete with the Lord's voice in your life. Prepare yourself for a renewed spiritual life by doing those things that promote spiritual growth, taking time to listen to His voice in the quiet moments, keeping the Lord in your thoughts, and especially reading His Word, which is the primary source of His voice. Filling your mind

up with the Lord's Word is like putting kindling on a low fire. You don't need to drop an entire tree on the fire, just little pieces at first for the Holy Spirit to ignite. As the fire grows, you can add more "fuel."

April 14 : Scriptures 2 Kings 23-25

SUMMARY

King Josiah just got the bad news. Yehovah's judgment is coming, and there's no way to stop it. However, the Good News is that the Lord will hold it off until after King Josiah dies. So with the certainty of that happening, what would you expect many people to do? Right. You might as well party it up! Or at least go on with life as usual. Not King Josiah. In chapter 23, he calls for a solemn assembly of all the people and priests of Judah and Jerusalem (23:1). He reads the Torah to the people with all its commands, decrees, and statutes, and recommits himself and all of Judah to follow them faithfully.

Next, King Josiah clears every last thing associated with idolatry from the Temple and destroys it all. He does away with the pagan priests the previous kings appointed who had enabled the worship on the high places (finally!), clears out the male prostitutes and the women who made idol tapestries to Asherah by wrecking their homes ("Closing time! Don't know where you're going to go, but you can't stay here!"). The remaining priests who had helped with the high places of worship were allowed to return to service but not serve God's altar in the Temple. King Josiah goes so far as to tear down pagan worship sites that his ancestor, King Solomon, instituted (23:13)!

Here's the climax – King Josiah fulfilled Yehovah's word that was spoken about 300 years earlier, "The man of God cried out against the altar by the word of the Lord: "Altar, altar, this is what the Lord says, 'A son will be born to the house of David, named Josiah, and he will sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who are burning incense on you. Human bones will be burned on you'" (1 Kings 13:2). And that's precisely what happened. King Josiah goes to "ground zero" of Israel's idolatry, the altar at Bethel, crushes it, and burns it to ash along with the nearby Asherah pole. Just as Josiah had destroyed the first idolatrous elements from Solomon himself, so he destroys the first idolatrous elements from the first king (Jeroboam I) after the Great National Schism.

Additionally, Josiah burns the bones of the priests who had served that altar as the Lord had prophesied. However, he leaves the bones alone of the prophet who initially announced the curse. Finally, King Josiah moves north to Samaria, where his team destroys all the high places and kills the pagan priests on their altars, finalizing it all by burning their remains on their altars.

With the pagan worship system eradicated as wholly as possible, King Josiah calls for everyone to celebrate Passover as has never been done before (23:21-22), not even since

the days of the Judges centuries earlier! But that's not all. King Josiah goes after the remaining occultists in the land – “the mediums, the spiritists, household idols, images, and all the abhorrent things.” The King obliterated anything he found. Josiah's revival was the *most* complete and significant cleansing of God's land ever in Israel's history. Josiah's legacy is magnificent: “Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength according to Moses's law, and no one like him arose after him” (23:24).

And yet, despite all of King Josiah's reforms, Yehovah's judgment loomed large over Judah. The Lord had promised a terrible national punishment, and He didn't relent (23:26)! It just wouldn't happen in King Josiah's day.

The good king died when he went up against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt as the Pharaoh and his army crossed the land of Israel to confront Assyria to the northeast. The people bury King Josiah and place his son, Jehoahaz, on the throne. King Jehoahaz is twenty-three years old and reigns for a short time because “he did what was evil in the Lord's sight just as his ancestors had done” (23:32). Because Judah has now weakened nationally and without the Lord's protection, Pharaoh Neco arrests King Jehoahaz as a hostage and fines the people of Judah “seventy-five hundred pounds of silver and seventy-five pounds of gold,” roughly \$55 million at the time of this writing. Then Pharaoh Neco installs Jehoahaz's son Eliakim (age twenty-five) as his vassal-king and changes his name to Jehoiakim. Remember what I wrote earlier about renaming things? In this case, it's a sign of Pharaoh's authority over his new subservient vassal. Pharaoh Neco then takes Eliakim's/Jehoiakim's father to Egypt where the king dies (23:34). Jehoiakim rules for eleven years and continues to tick God off with his idolatry.

However, Jehoiakim's vassal arrangement doesn't last for long. That far eastern power called Babylon has now reached full stride. During Jehoiakim's reign, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon attacks Judah and makes Judah his vassal for three years. But Jehoiakim rebels after those three years (O, foolish king!). That's when Nebuchadnezzar unleashes waves of raiders against Judah as a punishment, but the punishment is actually from Yehovah (24:3). Jehoiakim dies, and his son, Jehoiakin, takes his place.

Here's a tip to help keep these two kings straight. “M” comes before “N.” Jehoiakim reigns before Jehoiakin. You can thank me when you win a million dollars on Jeopardy because of this knowledge.

Why was Nebuchadnezzar able to wrest Judah and King Jehoiakim from Pharaoh Neco? Because “the king of Babylon took everything that had belonged to the king of Egypt, from the Brook of Egypt to the Euphrates River” (24:7). The Babylonian empire had grown so strong it crushed the Assyrian and Egyptian empires and took control of all the land from the Nile (west) to the Euphrates (east). Sadly, Judah was in his path.

So back to King Jehoiakin. He became king at eighteen and reigned for only three months from Jerusalem. And yes, he did the same thing as his wicked predecessors. The Babylonian army marched in and laid siege to Jerusalem at that time. When King Nebuchadnezzar arrived, King Jehoiakin, his household, and officials surrendered to Babylon’s king. And that’s when the deportations and exile begin. The Babylonians deport the best people and strip the Temple of its treasures (24:13-16). For the record, the famous prophet Ezekiel and Daniel are both deported to Babylon around this time.

Nebuchadnezzar makes Jehoichin’s uncle, Mattaniah, his vassal-king, and changes his name to Zedekiah. Yes, he did the same thing as his brother (Jehoiakim) and nephew (Jehoiachin). He also rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, which brought total destruction to Judah.

Chapter 25 completes our cruise through 2 Kings and the history of Israel’s kings with some rather sobering details. In 586 B.C., on the 17th day of Tammuz (the Jewish month that occurs in July), the Babylonians reached the walls of Jerusalem. Three weeks later, on the 9th of Av, the First Temple was destroyed.

In short, because of Zedekiah’s rebellion, King Nebuchadnezzar returns with his army to finish off this pesky tiny country. After a two-year siege, the remaining starving Judahites escape Jerusalem and make a run for it. King Nebuchadnezzar catches up to King Zedekiah, kills his sons, blinds the king, and takes him as a prisoner back to Babylon. Then the Babylonians trash the city, tear down its protective wall, and deport most of the remaining people, leaving only a few of the poorest people to work the land (25:12). Next, the Temple is stripped of its treasures and precious materials and destroyed. Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guards, collects the “officials” and brings them to King Nebuchadnezzar, who puts them to death. And now Israel’s 70-year Babylonian Exile begins.

Let’s tie up a few loose ends. Nebuchadnezzar appoints Gedaliah as Governor over what’s left of Jerusalem and Judah. However, some evil men assassinate Gedaliah and some Judeans and Chaldeans (Babylonians) and flee to Egypt. And now for a twist! When the new Babylonian king, Evil-Merodach, comes to power, he looks with favor upon

Judah's captive King Jehoiachin. Evil-Merodach releases Judah's second-to-last king from prison, places him above all the other kings Babylon has captured, grants Jehoiachin a place at the royal table, and gives him a regular allowance. And so ends 1 & 2 Kings. Now we're going to go through the history of Israel's kings again, only this time from a priest's point of view and some fascinating information left out of 1 & 2 Kings.

INSIGHT

What led to Israel and Judah's downfall? The reason can be placed squarely at the feet of rebellious idolatry. Israel as a united nation thrived under David's reign because he was devoted to the Lord. Yes, he wasn't perfect, but he had a heart for God and took his discipline seriously. King Solomon started strong but eventually caved to the desires of the flesh. These desires coaxed King Solomon into idolatry, which became so entrenched that the Lord had to split the nation and eventually wipe them out. But Yehovah will never break his covenant with His people. He will start anew with the left behind remnant and the survivors who will return to Jerusalem from Babylon after 70 years.

It's a hard fact, but sometimes sin and rebellion can become so entrenched in our lives that the Lord has to do some major demolition work. He wants to get us to the point that our rebellion and idolatry are utterly smashed, so He can rebuild us as He wants us to be.