

Week 5: The Kings of Judah

Introduction

Assyria, after conquering Israel, wants to continue its conquest South and will start to threaten Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem. We'll be reading about that this week from 2 Kings 18-23, but before we get into it, let's introduce the Kingdom of Judah.

Really, the last time we mentioned them was in Week 1 - we saw that Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon, retained two tribes - Judah and Benjamin. The other ten tribes gave their allegiance to Jeroboam in the North, in the Kingdom of Israel. And we saw how badly that went...

Judah was not much better. Judah, of course, did have one advantage over Israel - they had the Temple that was built by King Solomon in Jerusalem. If you remember, what really started the issues in the Northern Kingdom was that Jeroboam built the high places and the golden calves in Bethel and Dan. And the reason he built them was so that people wouldn't be tempted to go to Jerusalem and worship in the Temple, and then become attached to Judah. Judah doesn't have these issues, so you would think that they shouldn't have any reason to fall into idolatry, right?

Unfortunately, that's not the case. Even from Rehoboam, the first king, he tolerated idolatry. We read in 1 Kings 14: "Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord, and they provoked Him to jealousy with their sins which they committed, more than all that their fathers had done. For they also built for themselves high places, sacred pillars, and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree. And there were also perverted persons in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel."

So they had idolatry, sodomy, prostitution, and many other sins. The Lord brought judgment on them by the Egyptians who in the early days of King Rehoboam, came up against Jerusalem and plundered the Temple and plundered the king's house and took all of the gold. But still, they did not repent.

After Rehoboam, his son Abijam reigned for three years and "he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him; his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David."

After Abijam, his son Asa reigned for forty-one years and "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did his father David. And he banished the perverted persons from the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made." "His heart was loyal to the Lord all his days."

During King Asa's reign is when King Ahab was king over Israel. And after King Asa, his son Jehoshaphat reigned in Judah for twenty-five years "And he walked in all the ways of his father Asa. He did not turn aside from them, doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord. And the rest of the perverted persons, who remained in the days of his father Asa, he banished from the land."

After King Jehoshaphat, his son Jehoram reigned for eight years. And he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, just as the house of Ahab had done - he worshipped Baal and made high places. When he became king, he also killed his six brothers, to ensure his throne. We read his account in 2 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 21. But why? How could such an evil king from a father and grandfather of good kings? Because he married the daughter of Ahab - Athaliah.

This is why the Lord always forbid Israel from intermarrying with other nations - because their wives would bring their idols with them and have evil influence over their husbands. This is around the time of Elijah the Prophet, and Elijah actually sends a letter to Jehoram. So even though we usually identify Elijah as a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the Lord used him to prophesy also to the Southern Kingdom. The letter said: "Thus says the Lord God of your father David:

Because you have not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat your father, or in the ways of Asa king of Judah, 13 but have walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and have made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to play the harlot like the harlotry of the house of Ahab, and also have killed your brothers, those of your father's household, who were better than yourself, 14 behold, the Lord will strike your people with a serious affliction—your children, your wives, and all your possessions; 15 and you will become very sick with a disease of your intestines, until your intestines come out by reason of the sickness, day by day." Still, he did not repent.

The Lord stirred up the Philistines and the Arabians to come up against Judah and against Jehoram and they invaded the king's house in Jerusalem. They took all his possessions and even all of his sons and their wives, except for his youngest son (Ahaziah). And still, he did not repent.

Finally, the Lord afflicted him with the disease of his intestines and he died in severe pain. The Scripture tells us "He reigned in Jerusalem eight years and, to no one's sorrow, departed. However they buried him in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings." It was a dishonorable death and he was a dishonorable king.

After him, his youngest son Ahaziah became king and reigned over Judah for only one year. He did evil in the sight of the Lord like the house of Ahab. Remember, that his mother Athaliah, is the daughter of Ahab.

When he was killed, his mother Athaliah - the daughter of Ahab, reigned in his place. And she wanted to kill all of the royal heirs - but Ahaziah's sister took one of Ahaziah's sons and hid him away and nursed him and took care of him for six years. When he was seven years old, he was taken into the temple and the priest - Jehoiada - took him in and guarded him in the Temple, and the crowned him and anointed him as king. And he sent the guards of the temple to Athaliah the Queen to kill her. And everyone rejoiced.

Joash became king at 7 years old and reigned for 40 years in Jerusalem. He "did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days in which Jehoiada the priest instructed him." Unfortunately, Jehoiada the priest died, and Joash lost his way. He abandoned God and allowed idol worship. When he was rebuked by Jehoiada's son, he had him stoned to death in the Temple. So although he started very well and he even repaired the Temple, he ended very poorly.

Then, his son Amaziah reigned in his place and he reigned 29 years. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, yet not like his father David; he did everything as his father Joash had done. So he also started good and ended poorly. He followed the Law, and the Lord gave him defeat over Edom, but then he became prideful! And he worshiped Edomite idols and God sent him a prophet, but he did not heed him. He was later assassinated.

Then, his son Uzziah reigned in his place and he reigned 52 years. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. So he also started good and ended poorly. He sought God and God made him prosper - victories against Philistines, Arabs, Ammonites. He built cities, strengthened Judah, improved agriculture... and then he became prideful. He tried to take over the priestly role and offer incense. He was struck with leprosy and forced to live in isolation the rest of his life.

After him, his son Jotham reigned for sixteen years and he "did what was right in the sight of the Lord; he did according to all that his father Uzziah had done (although he did not enter the temple of the Lord)." He was a good king, and the Lord gave him many victories and he had a strong relationship with God - "he prepared his ways before the Lord his God" (2 Chr 27:6). Under his reign, the people were still corrupt - so although he was good, he could not bring about a spiritual revival. He was one of Judah's best kings...

And after him, his son Ahaz reigned and he was one of Judah's worst kings. King Ahaz was interested in power - political power, military alliances, his kingdom, etc. He was not interested in God. So he went after the ways of the kings of Israel, and even made his son pass through the fire - he offered his son as a sacrifice. Isaiah prophesied during the time of King Ahaz and told him to trust in God, but he didn't listen. Instead of believing in God's protection, he sought protection from Assyria, and Judah became a state under Assyria's control. He went to Damascus and saw a nice altar there and then sent to his priests to make the same one.

After he dies, King Hezekiah becomes King, and that's where we will start reading from 2 Kings 18.

So to summarize all the kings:

Rehoboam - 17 years - evil

Abijah - 3 years - evil

King Asa - 41 years - good

King Jehoshaphat - 25 years - good

Jehoram - 8 years - evil (married Athaliah, daughter of Ahab)

Ahaziah - 1 year - evil (raised by Athaliah)

Athaliah - 6 years - evil (daughter of Ahab)

Joash - 40 years - good as he followed Jehoiada the priest, and then bad.

Amaziah - 29 years - started good, ended bad

Uzziah - 52 years - started good, ended bad

Jotham - 16 years - good

Ahaz - 16 years - very bad

The last few kings of Judah will be Hezekiah, a good king who will reign 29 years. Manasseh who started bad and then repented and reigns 55 years. Amon, who will be evil and reign 2 years.

Josiah, who will be the last good king and will reign 31 years. Then the last four evil kings:
Jehoahaz for 3 months
Jehoiakim for 11 years
Jehoiachin for three months
Zedekiah for 11 years.

One theme that we can see in all of these kings is that the good kings reigned for much longer... King Asa 41 years, King Jehoshaphat 25 years, King Joash 40 years, King Amaziah 29 years, King Uzziah 52 years. King Hezekiah 29 years. King Manasseh 55 years. King Josiah 31 years.

And the evil kings we see 3 months, 1 year, 3 years, 8 years, 11 years, at the most 16 years. When they did not depend on the Lord, it left them prone to execution or assassination, diseases, taken captive or prisoner, quarrels, etc.

The good kings were not perfect, but it's a much better track record than the kingdom of Israel.

This week, we'll read about the Great Kings: Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah. We'll see how the Lord preserved Judah as a Kingdom because of the prayers and leadership of the Prophet Isaiah and the Good King Hezekiah. And we'll see the repentance of King Manasseh.

2 Kings 18

There is something I didn't mention before about all the good kings. If we read from 1 Kings 15 about the righteous King Asa: "Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did his father David. And he banished the perverted persons from the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. Also he removed Maachah his grandmother from being queen mother, because she had made an obscene image of Asherah. And Asa cut down her obscene image and burned it by the Brook Kidron. But the high places were not removed."

And if we read from 1 Kings 22 about the righteous King Jehoshaphat: "And he walked in all the ways of his father Asa. He did not turn aside from them, doing what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Nevertheless the high places were not taken away, for the people offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places."

And if we read from 2 Kings 12 about Joash who started as a righteous king: "Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days in which Jehoiada the priest instructed him. But the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places."

2 Kings 14 Amaziah: "However the high places were not taken away, and the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places."

2 Kings 15 Uzziah: "Except that the high places were not removed; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places."

2 Kings 15 Jotham: "However the high places were not removed; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places."

So every good king so far, although he did what was right in the sight of the Lord, according to everything his good fathers had done, and some being compared to King David, the Scripture mentions that he did not remove the high places. These High Places were established by King Solomon in Judah for worshipping foreign gods and goddesses for his foreign wives, in the time of his life that he deviated. Remember that he returned in repentance before the end of his life. And these high places continued to be a stumbling block to Judah all the way until the days of King Hezekiah.

King Hezekiah was different. From 2 Kings 18, our chapter today: "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to everything his father David did. He removed the high places and broke into pieces the sacred pillars. He cut down the sacred wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent Moses had made, because up to those days, the sons of Israel had burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan. He trusted in the Lord God of Israel, and after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those that were before him. For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following Him, but kept all the commandments the Lord gave Moses. The Lord was with him. He prospered wherever he went."

King Hezekiah is the first king to remove the high places. And on top of that, Hezekiah broke in pieces the Bronze Serpent that Moses had made. Moses made this thing in the Book of Numbers hundreds and hundreds of years ago, and it's never again mentioned in the Scripture until now. Apparently, the Israelites had been burning incense to it and worshipping it, and calling it Nehushtan which means The Great Brass Serpent.

I want us to take a message for this for ourselves. We all have ups and downs. We may have times in our life where we deviate from the Lord and from doing what is right, or where we are caught up in sin or caught up in temptations or lusts. May God have mercy on us, when we come to our senses and repent, let our repentance be complete. And we can take two points from here about a complete repentance:

1. Look for the Hidden Sins

- This Bronze Serpent was hidden from us in the Scriptures... we didn't know it was happening until it was mentioned here. So let us also look for the hidden sins of our life.
- The ones we have grown so accustomed to, that we don't feel they are sins anymore.
- The ones we have justified for so long that we believe our justifications and excuses

2. Remove the Causes of Sin

- The High Places established by King Solomon became a cause of sin for the Kingdom of Judah for generations. And although they had good kings, they never removed the High Places.
- So the lesson here is not just to "stop doing a sin" - but to REMOVE the causes of sin.
- In the Saturday Psalm we sing "All the causes of sin, remove from our souls, O my Lord Jesus Christ, my Good Savior."

Let me REMOVE those things that caused me to sin. For example:

- I have a wicked friend who introduced me to sin - it's not enough for me to stop doing the sin, but let me remove the cause of the sin from my life. Let me remove the High Places!
- I have an app on my phone or a website that I frequent that leads me into temptation, let me remove that app from my phone. Remove the High Places.
- I know that when I get into watching Netflix or YouTube, I can go for hours and forget about everything around me - forget my spiritual life, even my studies or my family. So let me remove the app from my phone or even block it on my home's network! Let's remove the high places!
- I know that my Spotify has songs that are not appropriate for my ears as a Christian. What should I do? Install Spotify on my phone, my tablet, my laptop and my car? Definitely not. Remove the High Places! Don't build them up.
- I know that using social media gives me negative feelings - maybe jealousy, or lustful thoughts, or greed, or idolatry in making a celebrity my idol or something, or pride in looking at my own pictures and counting my likes and reactions, or gluttony in consuming videos about food and other luxuries non-stop. Remove the High Places! Deactivate my account and uninstall the app.
- The Lord Jesus Christ taught the concept of "radical amputation" - if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. HE Anba Youssef gives an example of if my eye causes me to sin by watching something inappropriate for me, what should I do? Should I really pluck out my eyeball? No! But let me amputate the extension of my eye: the phone or the laptop. Move the computer to the living room where my family is. Change my phone from an iPhone to a dumb phone that doesn't have a display, or doesn't have internet. Am I willing to pluck my eye out? Am I willing to remove the causes of sin?

What are the causes of sin in my life, and how can I be like Hezekiah to uproot them completely?

2 Kings 21 - King Manasseh

In 2 Kings 21, we see the evil King Manasseh. Despite his father being the most righteous king, a king like King David, the only king to get rid of high places and the bronze serpent and all of those things... King Manasseh comes and is one of the most evil.

He brings back the high places. He raises up an altar for Baal. He makes a wooden image. He worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. He builds altars in the house of the Lord (in the Temple!) for these host of heaven so that he can worship them there. Host of heaven here doesn't refer to God and the angels or anything like that... it refers to the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, Jupiter, Mercury, etc. It was part of the Assyrian religion and the Assyrian gods. He also offered his son as a sacrifice. He practiced witchcraft. He practiced sorcery and consulted psychics. He set a carved image of Asherah - a Canaanite goddess in the Temple of the Lord. He killed many innocent people "till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another." And all this he didn't do behind closed doors in his bedroom, but he compelled the whole kingdom of Judah and seduced them to do not just more evil than they ever had before, not just more evil than the kingdom of Israel, but more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed already.

The very interesting thing about this king, though, is that he ruled for 55 years. He is the only evil king of Judah to rule for a long time - and not only that, but the longest time. Longer than any other

good king. Why?

1 Kings 21 only gives us half of the story. And this is common in this era we are studying - the other half can be found in Chronicles. 2 Chronicles 33.

“¹⁰ And the Lord spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they would not listen. ¹¹ Therefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze *fetters*, and carried him off to Babylon. ¹² Now when he was in affliction, he implored the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, ¹³ and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

¹⁴ After this he built a wall outside the City of David on the west side of Gihon, in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate; and *it* enclosed Ophel, and he raised it to a very great height. Then he put military captains in all the fortified cities of Judah. ¹⁵ He took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the Lord and in Jerusalem; and he cast *them* out of the city. ¹⁶ He also repaired the altar of the Lord, sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it, and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel. ¹⁷ Nevertheless the people still sacrificed on the high places, *but* only to the Lord their God.

¹⁸ Now the rest of the acts of Manasseh, his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the Lord God of Israel, indeed they *are written* in the book of the kings of Israel.

King Manasseh was carried away by the Assyrians and the Scripture says they took him with hooks - which refers to a hook through the nose, and with bronze fetters (chains). He was carried away like an animal and degraded and his pride was broken. And he repented. Sometimes when we are going through a hardship, we might realize that the Lord is calling us to repentance.

I've seen some high school and college age youth who are unfaithful with their schoolwork - and even openly so - whether it's inappropriately using AI, or cheating on assignments, sometimes even paying for services that do their work for them, etc. and then they wonder why they aren't being offered internships and jobs... the Lord is calling you to repent!

Sometimes, I am surrounding myself with ungodly people - friends and relationships. And then I find myself in betrayal or heartbreak or loneliness or I find out that I was being used, or these were not really my friends... the Lord is calling me to repent!

Sometimes we are chasing our self-image, or even a false-image of ourselves that we create on social media. I'm chasing attention, likes, reactions, engagements, etc. and then I find myself

struggling with anxiety and depression, or a low self-worth... the Lord is calling us to repentance!

Here's a big one for youth - sometimes I neglect my parents' advice and wisdom. I even disrespect them, argue with them, dismiss their advice, ignore their phone calls, call them "old school" or "Egyptian mindset." And then I get older and find myself in financial struggles, personal failures, failed relationships, lack of guidance... the Lord is calling me to repentance.

Sometimes I only turn to the Lord when I'm in despair, when I'm in deep trouble, when I feel like I "need him" - so how will I expect the Lord to call me to Himself? If that's the only place I am willing to meet the Lord, and the Lord wants to meet me and He knows that what is best for me is to meet Him, then where will He meet me?

This is what happened with King Manasseh. King Manasseh definitely knew of the Lord from his father. And maybe He specifically knew that He could call out to the Lord in a time of trouble, as his father King Hezekiah did when he was sick. And that's what he did. And we can read his prayer in an important part of our Orthodox Scripture called The Prayer of Manasseh. The Prayer of Manasseh is one of the parts of the Old Testament that is not present in Protestant Bibles like the New King James Version... so you'll have to read it in Coptic Reader or in the Orthodox Study Bible. I'll send it in the group today.

I will encourage you to take this prayer and pray it the rest of this week in your prayers. It is a powerful prayer of repentance. And let me consider my sins when I am praying it, and let me take the message of repentance from King Manasseh today.

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