

## **An Aerial View of the Old Testament, (Part 4)**

### **Selected Scriptures**

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We're looking from about 30,000 feet at the Old Testament. We find ourselves tonight in part 4 of what I promised you would be a 5, or a 6-part study rather, of the entire Old Testament, and we're on course. So, I just want you to know that. Tonight, we'll look at the divided monarchy, the period of the kings. And next week or the next time we study this together, we'll look at the exile and the restoration when the children of Israel return to the land. Then we will look a sixth message at the message of the Old Testament. What is the core message of the Old Testament, and why is it there? We'll also look at the theme of each of the books briefly so you can put the whole thing in its context. So, don't miss the remaining messages because they'll draw hopefully everything to a conclusion.

But we're working our way through the historical overview of the Old Testament. And when you look at Old Testament history as I've told you before, there are nine major movements of Old Testament history – universal dealings in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, the rest of Genesis marks the patriarchal period, the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. And then, in Exodus 1 we have 400 years encapsulated in a single chapter, slavery in Egypt beginning in Exodus 2 and running through the rest of the Pentateuch, that's a word for the first five books of the Old Testament, you have the exodus under Moses. Joshua is the conquest and division of Canaan, and then after the land is conquered, Israel slips into the darkest period of her history, the period of the judges recorded in Judges and in Ruth as well as in the first eight chapters of 1 Samuel.

Last time we looked at the monarchy. We began to look in detail at the monarchy. We looked at what's called the united monarchy beginning in 1051 and running for 120 years. The kings ruled over all the nation of Israel. Tonight, we will move to the second stage of the monarchy, what is called the divided monarchy when the king of Israel is split into two parts with two different kingdoms and two different kings. The eighth period or movement of Old Testament history is the Babylonian exile, and then finally you have the restoration period. And we'll look at those, Lord willing, the next time we're able to study this together.

Now, last time we ended with the life and reign of Solomon. His death marks the end of the united monarchy. So, one king ruled over all Israel (if you can put this into context), one king over all Israel for only 120 years of her entire history. Forty years under Saul, forty years under David, and forty years under Solomon. Under their rule, a central government was established and strengthened. Israel's border was extended. So, the united monarchy, those 120 years, was in many senses the high point of Israel's history. If the period of the judges was the low point, the united monarchy, particularly under David and even the early years of Solomon, were the height of Israel's history.

But upon Solomon's death, the glory days ended, and we begin the period of the divided monarchy. It's recorded for us in the book of Kings as well as in the book of Chronicles. And Chronicles serves a different purpose. We'll look at that when we get to the restoration period. But 1 Kings 12 begins the divided monarchy after the death of Solomon, and it runs all the way through the end of 2 Kings.

Now, why (are the book of,) is the book of Kings, it's really one book, we call it 1 and 2, but why is it there? Its purpose is threefold, to remind the Jewish people who were in captivity in Babylon of their consistent violation of the Mosaic Covenant that they agreed to keep, to show them that the exile they were experiencing was consistent with the covenant.

God had promised cursing for disobedience. He had promised hardship and trouble and even ultimately exile, and their exile was consistent with that covenant they entered into. And of course, ultimately it was to encourage their repentance while they set in exile in Babylon thinking about, contemplating how did we get here.

Now when you look at the book of 1 and 2 Kings, essentially this is how it's outlined. First Kings, you have the kingdom united under Solomon in the first 11 chapters, and then the kingdom divided with many different kings beginning in 12 - 22. That continues into 2 Kings, but you really could say the kingdom divided, and Israel falls in the first 17 chapters, it's in 17

that the north falls. And then in 18 - 25, Judah survives but ultimately falls herself. And if you don't understand those designations, stay with me, you will before we're done tonight.

Now, we finished with Solomon, and we finished with his accommodation of his foreign wives, those wives (he entered in,) he married as he entered into alliances with foreign countries, they became to him more than the seals of those covenants. They pulled his heart away from God, and he built places of worship, (idolatrous places of worship) so that his wives would have a place to worship and in so doing, he terribly dishonored God. He facilitated idolatry in Israel, and God determines to take most of the kingdom away from Solomon's descendants.

Look at 1 Kings 11, 1 Kings 11. And you see that God has determined this, even before the end of Solomon's life. Look especially at verse 29. There was a man in Solomon's employ who was over the forced labor, and his name was Jeroboam.

It came about, [verse 29 of 1 Kings 11 says, that] when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah found him on the road. ... Ahijah had clothed himself with a new cloak; and both of them were alone in the field. Then Ahijah took hold of that new cloak ... and he tore it into twelve pieces. [And] He said to Jeroboam, "Take ... ten pieces; for ... [this is what the LORD, the God of Israel says,] 'Behold, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and give you ten tribes.'" [Why? Verse 33,] ... "because they have forsaken Me, and have worshiped ... [all of these idols in the place of Me.] 'Nevertheless,' [verse 34,] 'I will not take the whole kingdom out of ... [Solomon's] hand, but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of My servant David whom I chose, who observed My commandments and My statutes; but I will take the kingdom from his son's hand and give it to you, *even* ten tribes. But to his son I will give one tribe, that My servant David may have a lamp always before Me in Jerusalem....'" [even as God had promised David.]

So, God had determined that Israel would be divided. How did He accomplish that? He did it through the sin of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. After Solomon's death, the people approached Solomon's son Rehoboam with a request that he lift some of the hardship that Solomon had

exacted from them. You can read about it in 1 Kings 12:1-5. Rehoboam then asks for three days to consider their request, and during those three days, you remember the story, Rehoboam consults with two groups. He consults with those older men who had served along with Solomon. He seeks advice about how to maintain his control over his father's kingdom. And the elders tell him you must give the people some tax relief (that'd be nice, wouldn't it) and scale back significantly on the forced labor for various building projects. And if you will ease up on the requirements of them, they will serve you your entire life.

Then he asked his peers for their counsel. And his peers said oh no, that's not the right response. If you want to establish your authority, you need to assert yourself, you need to flex your muscles. You tell them that if your father whipped them with whips, you'll whip them with scorpions. He took the advice of his peers. First Kings 12:15 says, "So the king did not listen to the people;" [and this is interesting,] "for it was a turn *of events* from the LORD, that He might establish His word, which the LORD spoke through Ahijah to Jeroboam the son of Nebat." God had a plan, and Rehoboam's sin was the channel He used to effect that plan. As a result of God's decision, accomplished through the decision or sin I should say of Rehoboam, the ten northern tribes broke away from the line of David. They established their own separate kingdom in the north. They had their own royal family, and they even created their own religion and worship centers.

So, as of 931 B.C., there were two kingdoms of Israel divided like this. You can see Judah, along with Judah the tribe of Benjamin in the south in the green. And then in the north where you see the purple was Israel. The north as it's called is also called Israel, and the south as it's called is also called Judah, so you can keep those names straight. By the way, Israel is also sometimes called (the purple area) the north area, is also sometimes called Ephraim.

Now let me compare these two dynasties for you, or these two kingdoms rather for you. This will give you an overview. In the north, you had Israel or Ephraim. In the south, you had what was called Judah. In the north, you had ten tribes. In the south, you had two tribes, primarily Judah, but with remnants of Benjamin. In the north, in the northern kingdom, understand that over its lifespan there were nine different dynasties.

Remember what makes a king? What makes a king a king? He's succeeded by his son. A dynasty is when one family continues on the throne. In the north, there were nine different dynasties. You can just see the incredible upheaval that was a part of the north. In the south, you had one dynasty, the line of David, the family of David ruled on the throne.

In the north through its life, it had 19 kings, and its lifespan was a lot shorter than the south, 19 kings. In the south you also had 19 kings and 1 queen. But in the north, there wasn't a single good king in the list, not one who obeyed God, not one who did what God had commanded. In the south, 8 of those 19 were classified as good kings and 5 of them were reformers, they instituted religious reforms, they were Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah and Josiah. The high point of the south in the divided kingdom was a man named Josiah.

The first king of the north is Jeroboam, and the first king of the south is Rehoboam. The north was destroyed in 722 B.C. by the massive kingdom of Assyria, and we'll talk about how that happened next time. And in the south, they were destroyed in 586, much later, by Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. So, that's a comparison of the divided kingdom.

Now when Jeroboam, the very first king of the north, the one who got the ten tribes, got the ten pieces of cloth and the ten tribes, as king of the north, Jeroboam reasoned that if his people were always going south to Jerusalem, (Jerusalem found itself in the southern portion), that if his people were always going there for worship, the appointed festivals and feasts, the two nations would ultimately be reunited and he would lose his authority. So, he established in the north a substitute system of worship. He built gold images of calves in two places, Dan and Bethel.

Now you sometimes will hear about that, I just put these arrows here to mark them for you. You can see that Dan is way up in the north up in the top part of the region of Israel. Bethel is right down near the southern portion of the northern ten tribes of the northern kingdom. And I threw Beersheba on there because sometimes you'll read in Scripture about something happening from Dan to Beersheba. That's shorthand for saying the entire country, from top to bottom.

So, the important thing I want you to note though is that Jeroboam established replacement or substitute worship centers in Dan, to make it convenient for people in the northern portion of his kingdom, and in Bethel, for people in the southern portion of his kingdom. And in those two places he erected gold images of calves. It was I think still an intent to worship Yahweh, but with a new way, a new twist. It was syncretism. It was seeker sensitivity. It was an effort to keep the northern ten tribes from going to Jerusalem, consolidating his own rule by doing that.

Most scholars do not believe that initially anyway, these golden calves represented idols, but rather they represented the animals on which Yahweh stood in invisible form as (I, as) we studied when we studied idolatry together, that was common. It wasn't that the bull represented the god necessarily, some cases that was true. But often the bull was simply like the chariot on which he rode, it demonstrated some attribute of the deity, his power. And so, it's very possible that these calves were intended to be the animals on which Yahweh stood in invisible form.

He built temples to house the images, and he built altars. Because of this, many Levites ended up leaving Israel for Judah because he appointed priests from the common people and absolutely ignored the Levites, who were supposed to be priests. He created an annual feast and substituted it for the Feast of Tabernacles. He put it about one month later and said you don't need to go down to Jerusalem; you just come and do this new thing. An important recurring phrase that occurs throughout the Kings says this, speaking of one of the kings, "He walked in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which he made Israel sin." God did not take this replacement religion lightly. In fact, He was deeply offended by it and brings His judgment to bear.

Of the 18 kings that followed Jeroboam in the north, every one of them without exception followed in Jeroboam's sinful idolatrous path. They followed this to the "T". They read the script, and they stuck with it. Now when you look at the kings, there's going to be a quiz on this next week, I just want you to know that. No, I'm putting this up again (not so much because I intend to go through it in great detail, but) just so you have in your notes when I print this out a comparative list of the kings of the divided kingdom. You'll see on the left are the kings of Judah, and I've tried to roughly correspond them to the kings of Israel when they ruled together

so you can kind of get a feel for when they ruled. And I'm not going to go through much of this, except I want to make one very interesting comment.

As you look at these kings (and I'm going to go back and touch on a couple of them that are key), but as you look at these kings, first of all, you'll notice that Israel ends in 722. You see no kings after that, that's when the north was captured by Assyria and was taken off into captivity. Judah continues after the north falls, and that's why the line of kings continues down a little further.

The second note I want you to see in this list of kings, and I wish we had time to look at this because it's fascinating. God promised that He would deal with each person based on his own obedience or disobedience, and the kings are complete proof of that. It's also proof that you cannot put someone in the right environment and expect automatically to turn out the right product because if you look at the kings, you will find that there are, there are righteous kings who have righteous sons. You will find that there are wicked kings who have wicked sons. You will also find that there are righteous kings who have wicked sons and wicked kings who have righteous sons.

The point I want you to see is that as parents, we tend to think if we input a certain thing, we're going to get output B there is, or output A or whatever it is you're expecting, but there's no guarantee of that reality, and the kings are a very clear indication of that reality. God deals with each person based on the response of their own sinful heart to Him.

Now, when you look at the kings, the greatest crisis in the kings, the period of the kings of the divided monarchy, came when Ahab of Israel (this is in the north), Ahab married a Zidonian. You know from history, a Phoenician on the coast of the Mediterranean there. Ahab of Israel married a Phoenician princess, and her name was Jezebel, not a name you want to choose for your daughter. Then Jezebel, this Phoenician princess, she moves into the palace in Israel with her upbringing, the faith that she had as a child which was Baal worship. And she sets out to eradicate the worship of Yahweh in the northern kingdom and to institute the worship of her childhood and patron deity Baal.

But the problem didn't stay in the north; it also spread to the southern kingdom because Ahab and Jezebel conspired to marry their wicked daughter Athaliah to a king in the south. So, they export their faith and all that they're doing to the south, and Athaliah marries Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. Elijah pronounced a curse. After his death, they receive a letter that he had written before his death pronouncing a curse on Jehoram for his sin.

Now, what happens though is very tragic because now in the south, you have Jehoram, a king in the line of David, who's married Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel from the north, and they had a son named Ahaziah. And Ahaziah becomes king after Jehoram his father died. And here's what we read about this man. Second Chronicles 22:4, "He did evil in the sight of the LORD like", [remember now he's in the south], "he did evil in the sight of the LORD like the house of Ahab (in the north), for they were his counselors after the death of his father, to his destruction."

And shockingly, Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel in the north, eventually became the queen of the south, the queen of Judah, a position that she held for six years. And perhaps the greatest crisis in Israel's history comes when Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, a Baal worshiper, seeks to obliterate the line of David, the line in which God promised the Messiah would come. She attempted to exterminate the Davidic line, and there was one survivor by God's providence, one final survivor, a young boy was saved from the murderous plot. Look at 2 Kings 11:1,

When Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she rose and destroyed all the royal offspring. [So, she's trying to kill off the line of David.] But Jehosheba, the daughter of King Joram, sister of Ahaziah, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him from among the king's sons who were being put to death, and placed him and his nurse in the bedroom. So they hid him from Athaliah, and he was not put to death. So he was hidden with her in the house of the LORD six years, ... [the entire time that Ath]aliah reigned in the south.]



Understand that all Old Testament prophecy and God's eternal plan to have the Messiah come from David and the line of David came down to the rescue of this one little boy. These were dark and troubling times as Satan, using the paganism that was imported into the land by Ahab, tries to blot out the line of the Messiah. It was in such a dark time that Yahweh raised up two great prophets, men named Elijah and Elisha. Look at 1 Kings 17, here's where we first meet Elijah. Elijah the Tishbite, chapter 17 of 1 Kings verse 1. "Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab."

Now this is the first time he ever appears, you got to get the picture. Remember that Jezebel had set out to erase the worship of Yahweh from the land. She had brought in Baal worship. At this point, 400 prophets of Baal were on the government payroll in the north. And Elijah shows up at the palace. I can promise you this. When his name was announced, a hush came over the throne room and gasps were probably heard because Elijah's name in Hebrew is "Eliyahu", which means "my God is Yahweh".

So, he shows up in the court of Ahab and he's announced as the guy whose name is "my God is Yahweh". Take that. And he says, "As sure as the Lord God, the God of Israel lives," verse 1, "before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." You know, Elijah was simply referring back to the covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, which said if you disobey, if you worship idols, if you turn from me, then I will turn off the clouds of heaven and you will have no rain. And Elijah says that's exactly what God's going to.

The prophet Elijah (30% of 1 and 2 Kings is occupied with the ministry of these two great prophets). Why is so much space and emphasis given to the prophets Elijah and Elisha? These prophets ministered throughout the monarchy in a very specific office because the key figures in the structure of the nation throughout the period of the monarchy was the king, the high priest and the prophet. Samuel was the first prophet. He began a school of prophets according to 1 Samuel 10:5. And the primary role of the prophet in the nation was to serve as God's mouthpiece to keep the kings and priests accountable to the Word of Yahweh, accountable to Scripture.

Now the word prophet, when you think about prophets, the word “prophecy” is actually not a translation, but a transliteration. It has been brought over letter from letter, letter by letter from another language. Our English word prophecy comes from the Greek word “prophetes”. And that Greek word is made up of two Greek words, “pro” which means “before” and “phemi”, which means “to speak”. So literally, it means “to speak before or to speak for another”. And you see this throughout the Old Testament. More than 3,800 times in the Old Testament, the Old Testament writers introduce their messages with statements like this. “The Word of the Lord came to so and so”, “the mouth of the Lord has spoken”, “the Lord says”, “thus says the Lord”, “the Lord spoke”, “hear the Word of the Lord”, etc., etc. Over and over again, that is their claim. A true prophet was one who did not speak out of his own heart, but rather as an appointed speaker for God. He was God’s messenger, like Jeremiah 1 says, “I have put My words in your mouth.” That’s what it meant to be a prophet. To put it another way, the prophet speaks a message for God. So, prophecy then (listen carefully), is a revelation from God. It is not explaining existing revelation, it is new truth. A prophet is one who brings truth from God, who speaks for God, who gives divine revelation. Typically, that new revelation takes two distinct forms. It can either be predictive, that is it’s predicting something that’s still in the future, or it can be moral or ethical. It can simply be a sermon (if you will), from God about how the people are living, and much of the prophets are filled with that kind of thing.

Moses predicted in Deuteronomy that these future prophets like him would come. And he laid down three criteria for discerning a true prophet from a false prophet. He said in Deuteronomy 18, their predictions always come true. If their predictions don’t come true, stone them. They’re not true prophets. There’d be a lot of dead prophets today if we practiced this.

The second criteria that Moses gave in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 was that the message that these prophets (a true prophet gives), always is in complete doctrinal agreement with previous revelation. Check ‘em out against the Bible is what Moses said, check ‘em out against the Scripture. It will not contradict what God has already revealed. Those were the two primary criteria for discerning a true prophet.

And the third is that, in addition, Moses seemed to indicate that God would often authenticate the true prophet by empowering him to work miracles. Not always, and the fact that you could work a miracle was not in and of itself a sign that you were a true prophet because Satan, of course, can fabricate all kinds of things. So the fact, that you could work a miracle, even if some of the guys today who claim to work miracles could work a miracle, that would not in and of itself authenticate them as God's messenger. These other primary characteristics have to be true.

The true prophet's word was immediately accepted even when they didn't like it. R. Laird Harris says,

Kings were humbled by their messages, battles were won or lost at their word. The temple was not built by David, but by his son Solomon. It was rebuilt by Zerubbabel all at the word of the Lord through the prophet. And the prophet rebuked their sins or encouraged them, but the prophets spoke God's revelation.

But (and here's the key thing I want you to get) the prophets not only spoke God into the situation in the monarchy, but they wrote as well. They wrote God's revelation. They wrote it down. This is the way the Old Testament was constructed. If you go back to Deuteronomy 31, you find out that Moses wrote the first five books in a scroll. Then Moses dies. Joshua adds to the scroll, which is pretty amazing considering Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 4:2 that God was going to curse whoever added to His Word, so obviously, Joshua was mandated by God Himself.

That's followed then by a series of writing prophets in Israel. There are a string of prophets who (if you will), add to the scroll. A chain of verses shows us the tradition of this series of writing prophets in Israel. One example is 1 Chronicles 29:29, "Now the acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the chronicles of Samuel the seer, in the chronicles of Nathan the prophet and in the chronicles of Gad the seer...." And each of these other references I've listed here give other examples of the same thing. They wrote down the history of the kings during their ministries. That's why we have these great books. The one who pulled that material together pulled it from (under the inspiration of the Spirit), these documents that had been written.

And then you have the major and minor prophets, we call them. By the way, when we talk about the Major Prophets, we're talking about them major because of the length of them, not importance. The Minor Prophets are the twelve prophets at the end of the Old Testament that were all put on one scroll because they were so small. So, you have the Major Prophets, the ones that needed a scroll all to themselves. And you had the Minor Prophets that were all on one scroll together, but not because of their importance.

From Isaiah through Malachi, all of these, here's what I want you to get, listen carefully. If you know the history we're going through, all of the prophets wrote during the flow of this history. And to understand the prophet and what he's saying, you have to plug him into his timeframe. You have to think about to whom was he writing, and what were the circumstances into which he wrote. So, if you know the flow of history that we're going through in these five weeks, then you know how the prophets relate because they all wrote in these periods of history for specific reasons.

Let's talk about them. Bible scholars break down the prophets by their relationship to the 70-year Babylonian exile. You have those prophets who wrote before the Babylonian exile, they're called pre-exilic. That makes sense, right, before the exile. They wrote before 606 B.C. And here are the ones listed that wrote before the Babylonian exile in 5, well it began in 606. So, notice who they are, I put numbers next to these names of the prophets to indicate the approximate chronological order in which they wrote. We can't be absolutely certain, but this gives you an idea of who wrote what when - now, and to whom. You see that Obadiah wrote his prophecy probably first, and it wasn't even to Israel, it was to Edom, a neighboring country. Jonah and Nahum both wrote to Assyria, to Nineveh, its capital. In the north to Israel, you have Amos and Hosea who ministered to the north. And then in the south, Judah, before the exile, you have this whole list - Joel and Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and Zephaniah and Habakkuk.

Now, why is there a cluster of prophets who write and prophesy before the nation goes into exile? Well, rewind to what we've talked about in previous weeks. In the ancient world, if you defeated another nation, then what did that say? It said that your god was stronger than the god of the nation you defeated. And so think with me about why it would be important for God to

speak through His prophets and to say you're going to fall. You're going to fall. You're going to be carried off into captivity. You're going to be carried off into captivity before it happens.

Not only was it a warning to the people calling them to repentance, but it was also an apologetic for the character of God so that when these foreign nations conquered Israel. They could read that Israel's God had prophesied that they would do exactly what they did, and it was because of their sin. It wasn't that their gods were stronger. It was that Yahweh, the only true and living God, had given His people up to exile because of their sin.

So, there's this cluster of prophets who write just before the exiles, both in the north and in the south. And they're saying you're going into exile, you better repent, things are bad but they're going to get worse, you better turn to God, stop your idolatry, stop your sins. And of course, they don't respond for any length of time at all and the exile occurs.

So then, there are those prophets that are called exilic prophets, that is, they write during the exile, from about 606 B.C. to 536 B.C. They wrote to the Jews who were in the Babylonian exile, and they are Daniel and Ezekiel, and we'll talk a little more about them the next time. And then the final group of prophets are post-exilic, after the exile, from 536 - 404 B.C. They wrote to the Jewish remnant who had returned from Babylon to the land of Israel, and they are Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

So, all the writing prophets (here's what I want you to get), all the writing prophets ministered during the time of the kings, 1 and 2 Kings, except the two that ministered during the exile, Daniel and Ezekiel, and the three that ministered after the exile, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. And it's very convenient that they're at the end because that makes them easy to remember. They are at the end.

Now, the primary role of the prophet in the nation was to serve as God's mouthpiece to keep the king and the priests accountable to the Word of Yahweh. So, when a prophet confronts the king (listen carefully), when a prophet confronts the king, there has been some deviation from the divine standard. And the higher the profile of the prophets, you know the greater the deviation of

the king and the society from the standard. So, the more you read about the prophets, the more you know the people and the king are not obeying God.

Under Jeroboam and then Ahab and Jezebel, the worship of Yahweh is almost extinct, and so during that period of time, there are 14 chapters telling the stories of Elijah and Elisha. And those are clear evidences of the corruption of their times. Both Elijah and Elisha ministered in the north, Elijah in 1 Kings 17 - 2 Kings 1; and Elisha, 1 Kings 2 - 8:15.

So, you have the kings degenerating into worse and worse idolatry. You have the prophets intervening, confronting, exposing their sin, calling them to repentance, telling them God's going to carry them into exile, and eventually the prophecy occurs, and God allows His people to be taken into exile. Now we're used to this story. But stop yourself for a moment, and think about this. The people God promised to make His own, His treasured possession, are now in exile, out of their land, under the thumb of pagan, dominating leaders. Why? Why did God allow the captivity? It's in one simple word – idolatry.

During the reign of David, there was very little record of idolatry, but after his death after David's death, the influence of idolatry grew dramatically. Solomon, of course, we looked at that last week, it really began in earnest with Solomon accommodating his foreign wives. And then when the kingdom split, in the northern ten tribes Jeroboam set up these golden calves at Dan and Bethel. But the southern kingdom was no better, and you can read about that. But I want you to get a glimpse of just how bad things got, turn to 2 Kings 23. Second Kings 23, now what you have here in this passage, Josiah destroys Judah's idols, Josiah was the high point in the south, but I want you to see just how grossly the Canaanite gods had permeated Israel and her worship. (First Kings, or excuse me,) 2 Kings 23:4,

Then the king Josiah commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the doorkeepers, to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels that were made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. He did away with the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah

had appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the host of heaven. He brought out the Asherah,” [that’s an idolatrous form of female pagan deity, part of the Baal worship.] “He brought out the Asherah from the house of the LORD outside Jerusalem to the brook Kidron, and burned it in the brook Kidron, and ground *it* to dust, and threw its dust on the graves of the common people. He also broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes which were in the house of the LORD, where the women were weaving hangings from the Asherah.”

This is how bad it got, and the prophet said God has had enough. He has been patient. He has been patient again and again. The prophets speak against the idolatry. They say turn from your idols, turn to the true and living God, but in the end it was primarily Israel’s idolatry that led to downfall at God’s hands. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722. Why? Look at 2 Kings 17, 2 Kings 17. This chapter explains why it is that God has destroyed Israel or why Israel, the north, fell. Chapter 17:7,

Now *this* came about because the sons of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up from the land of Egypt, and they had feared other gods, they’d walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD had driven out before the sons of Israel, and *in the customs* of the kings of Israel which they had introduced. The sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the LORD their God. [and it goes on and details her idolatry.]

Verse 18, here’s the conclusion. Go back to verse 15. I’m sorry, verse 13,

Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah through all the prophets *and* every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways, keep My commandments, My statutes according to ... the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets.” ... [But] they did not listen. ... [They] stiffened their neck like their fathers, who did not believe in the LORD their God.

They rejected His statutes and His covenant which He made with their fathers and His warnings with which He warned them. [And they kept on their path.] ... They forsook,” [verse 16,] all the commandments of the LORD their God. ... So, [verse 18,] the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah. [That’s why the nation Israel in the north was ended.]

What about the south? Well the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians in 586, about 150 years later. Why? Well look at 2 Kings 23, 2 Kings 23:26. After we have all that Josiah did, and it was wonderful, he was the high point in the south; however (verse 26), [however in spite of all the reforms Josiah put into place,]

... the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of His great wrath with which His anger burned against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked Him,” [previous king who had brought idolatry in a massive way.] The LORD said, “I will remove Judah also from My sight, as I have removed Israel. And I will cast off Jerusalem, this city which I have chosen, and the temple of which I said, ‘My name shall be there.’”

So, God sends His people into captivity. Did it work? Did He purge His people permanently from idolatry? He did. Never again is Israel dominated, even to this day, never again is Israel dominated by idolatry in the same way that they were before the Babylonian captivity. It was only after the 70 years of Babylonian captivity that Israel was permanently broken of her desire for Baal.

What I want you to see, however, is in God’s wrath, He remembers mercy. He proved His graciousness again and again, perhaps no more powerfully than during the darkest days of the monarchy, the reign of Ahab. What lessons can we learn from the life of Ahab, the worst of the kings in the north and the south? Well perhaps you think this is the only lesson - mistakes. It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others. It may be that’s the only lesson we can learn from Ahab. No, it’s not, there’s a great lesson we can learn from Ahab.



In 1 Kings 21:25, again remember this is the worst, this is the greatest crisis, it says, “Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him.”

But I want you to notice what happens. Go back to 1 Kings, 1 Kings 21. First Kings 21:20,

Ahab said to Elijah, “Have you found me, O my enemy?” And he answered, “I have found *you*, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the LORD. Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, both bond and free in Israel; and I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat,” [in other words I’m going to erase all memory of you,] “like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, because of the provocation with which you have provoked *Me* to anger, and *because* you have made Israel sin. Of Jezebel also the LORD has spoken, saying, ‘The dogs will eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel.’ The one belonging to Ahab, who dies in the city, the dogs will eat, and the one who dies in the fields the birds of the heaven will eat.”

What a terrible prophecy, but notice Ahab’s response. Verse 27, “It came about when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently.” [That was his response.] So, how does God respond to this wicked, wicked man? Notice verse 28,

Then the word of the LORD, [after that display,] the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, “Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, *but* I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days.”

At the darkest moment in Israel’s history, the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, God sends a message of grace. Remember who’s reading this. It’s the children of Israel who are now in Babylonian

captivity away from their country reading about why they're there, because of their rebellion against God, because of their idolatry.

You see, the point for the exiles in Babylon reading this history for the first time as well as the point for us is this. Regardless of your spiritual condition, if you will repent and humble yourself before God and turn from your sin, God will hear your prayer. Ahab's repentance was not full and complete. But there's another king, we don't have time to look at whose repentance was complete, his name was Manasseh. And God, in spite of the incredible wickedness with which this man lived his life, when he humbled himself before God, when he repented, when he cried out to God, God responded in grace.

The lesson, I think, of the kings is this. God is a just God and He will deal with you according to your sin, but if you will ever bring yourself to the place where you're willing to humble yourself before God, you're willing to cry out for His mercy and grace, you're willing to turn from your sin, then God will hear and He will respond in grace and forgiveness because our God (and this is the message of the Old Testament and the New), our God is a Savior by nature. He delights in rescue, this is our God.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you for this brief overview of the kings, for this reminder of Your faithfulness to Your Word, both to bless where You promised to bless and to bring suffering and trial and pain where You promised to do that as well, discipline to Your people and wrath to Your enemies.

But Father, we thank you that whatever our condition, however sinful we may be, if we will truly humble ourselves before You like Manasseh did or to some extent even like Ahab, the worst of Israel's kings did, that if we will humble ourselves before You and cry out to You that You will hear. You are a gracious and merciful God. We thank you, oh God, that You are by nature a Savior.

Father, I pray that for us who are Your people, you would remind us afresh and anew of what we owe You.

Lord, I pray that for those who aren't, for those who are here tonight who don't know Jesus Christ, who've never bowed their knee in humble repentance before Him, may tonight be the night and may they have the hope and promise that You will hear.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.