

SESSION SEVENTEEN

THE COLLAPSE OF THE NORTHERN KINGDOM

2 Kings 1:1—17:41

I. INTRODUCTION

The book of Second Kings continues the evaluation of the monarchy, tracing the events that led to the exile of both kingdoms. The first kingdom to collapse by YHWH's judgment was the North, being carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom enjoyed a longer life but eventually was also judged by means of the Babylonian captivity beginning in 605 BC. The collapse of the Northern Kingdom is recorded in 2 Kgs 17, and most of the material in the first 17 chapters concerns the Northern Kingdom. This session will treat the events associated with the Northern Kingdom in chapters 1–17.

The author of Kings (i.e., the final compiler) was concerned with answering two questions:

1. Why did judgment fall on a nation having the promises of YHWH?
2. In what manner did judgment fall?

In answering these questions, material is included tracing the development that leads to the downfall of each nation. The monarchy is continually evaluated, bearing out the evidence of deserving judgment. But in the case of both kingdoms, judgment was slow in coming. The Northern Kingdom was given over 200 years to shape up and obey YHWH, and the Southern Kingdom was given well over 300 years. Thus, the judgment which fell was delayed (by grace), although the people were continually forewarned by the prophets. The Book of Kings (both 1 and 2) demonstrates the failure of the chosen nation under monarchy, and the period of apostasy paved the way for the great era of the prophets. While the monarchy is decaying, YHWH continues to assert His control over the monarchy through the prophets.

II. PURPOSE OF 2 KINGS

Elliott Johnson has described the purpose of this book as follows:

*to evaluate the collapse of the MONARCHY,
while extending the life of the kingdom in grace
through the prophets and good kings of the south.*¹

The most crucial point at which YHWH establishes His rule is to show that despite every bit of grace offered, He will not continually permit His nation to go on in the direction they are headed. He will maintain His rule and authority, and use discipline upon His people to do so. Even when destruction and captivity are eventually ushered in, God does not terminate His program with His people. Through the agency of His prophets and the reform ministry of some of the good kings in the South,

¹Elliott E. Johnson, "2 Kings" (class lecture notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, Fall 1977).

YHWH does maintain a faithful remnant of people for Himself through whom He can continue His divine program as reflected in the Abrahamic covenant.

III. SEEDS OF JUDGMENT IN THE NORTH

In the book of 1 Kings, at least two key problems surfaced which contributed to God's judgment on Israel in the north.

A. Jeroboam's Altered Worship System

The first seed of judgment was Jeroboam's altered worship system. Although not meant to be a total repudiation of YHWH worship, it was nevertheless primarily idolatrous.

B. Ahab's Promotion of Baal Worship

The other seed of judgment stemmed from Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, which led to the adopting of Baal worship as the official state religion. Fortunately, God raised up Elijah to put a check on this and to render a devastating blow to the prophets of Baal. Nevertheless, Baal worship continued to have its influence upon the Northern Kingdom even until the time of Jehu.

In 2 Kings, new seeds of judgment are planted:

C. Ahaziah's Inquiry of Baal-zebub

Chapter 1 of 2 Kings opens with the scene of Ahaziah (the son of Ahab) experiencing a grave illness following an accident. Rather than turning to YHWH, he chooses to send a messenger to Ekron of Philistia:

"Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this sickness" (1:2).

This was a serious decision, for it reveals his utter lack of faith in the God of Israel. Consequently, Elijah is commissioned to rebuke him.

"Thus says the LORD, 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?'" (1:6)

The king obviously had no regard for YHWH, and hence no appreciation for His Law or a sense of accountability to the LORD. This gesture was an insult of the highest order to YHWH.

D. Jehoram's Repudiation of God's Grace

Another seed of judgment came with the negative response of Jehoram to the manifestation of God's grace. Ahab's first son was Ahaziah who died as an indication of God's judgment upon his total unbelief in YHWH. Another son of Ahab, Jehoram, then came to the throne. Although he was somewhat better than his father Ahab (3:2), he was still quite evil. The thing about Jehoram that is so striking is that, despite several key events that should have led him to repentance, he never repents. He had seen his father and brother divinely judged, and he should have been more responsive to the LORD. During Jehoram's reign, God gives abundant grace, for it was during his reign that the recorded ministry of Elisha occurred.² The LORD brought

²In addition to the *grace motif*, Heater has pointed out the connection of Elisha's miracles with the sphere of nature, and has suggested that these miracles demonstrate Yahweh's superiority to the fertility cult in the north and thus the false deities worshiped by the Israelites (Homer Heater, Jr., "A Theology of Samuel and Kings," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1991], 135).

acts of discipline upon the nation, but sovereignly protected them. Jehoram was allowed to defeat the king of Moab who had rebelled against him. When the Syrians invaded the land, God used Elisha to thwart the attack and show Jehoram that the LORD was in absolute control of Israel's welfare (6:20-23). Yet even in the process, God's grace was reflected from a different angle. "The spectacular healing of the Aramean general, Naaman, showed that Yahweh was capable of restoring life to dead flesh (his 'flesh' was 'restored,' 2 Kings 5:14), that He was gracious to foreigners, and that His prophet was not a mercenary as were most of the prophets of Israel."³ These were strong evidences of the grace of God to Jehoram, but his response was always inadequate. Consequently, YHWH sent Syria to lay siege to Samaria. The testimonies of YHWH's grace by the hand of Elisha should have been a sufficient motivation for Jehoram to humble himself and cry out for God's mercy in this trial. On the contrary, he repudiated Elisha, saying,

"May God do so to me and more also, if the head of Elisha the son of Shapat remains on him today" (6:31).

This was a foolish reaction. If anyone could have helped Jehoram during this horrible siege when the whole town was starving and turning to cannibalism, it would have been Elisha. But the denunciation of Elisha was also a repudiation of the LORD, and Jehoram was not willing to turn to the LORD.

Yet, God's grace was overwhelming. Even though Jehoram persists in his repudiation of YHWH, the LORD sovereignly and graciously lifts the siege and provides food for the inhabitants of the capital city of Samaria. How does Jehoram respond now to this undeserved manifestation of YHWH's grace? Answer: *no response!* He is strangely silent and remains unmoved by the sheer grace of God.

Yet, even then the LORD gives Jehoram one more opportunity in 8:1-6. Jehoram gets to have a private talk with Gehazi, Elisha's servant, who tells him about all the great things that Elisha had done (8:4). While Gehazi tells him the episode of the Shunamite woman whose son was restored to life, she herself comes up and recounts the story. The king responds by granting her all that she formerly possessed. The significant thing, however, is the inadequacy of his response. Here, he had just been treated to a review of all the gracious acts that God wrought through Elisha. But he does not marvel and respond in awe. Once again, he is virtually unmoved. Ironically, the Shunamite's son who was restored to life is a portrayal of what the king and the nation could have experienced spiritually. If only there was a response to the grace of God, there could have been restoration. Unfortunately, Jehoram only made a small act of kindness to the woman, whereas he should have cast himself on YHWH in complete humility.

This was the final straw for Jehoram and a decision of serious consequence for the Northern Kingdom. In response, Elisha is commissioned to do two things. First, he is sent to Damascus to commission Hazael as king, who will bring catastrophic disciplinary acts upon Israel (note Elisha's own emotional reaction in 8:12). Second, Elisha initiates the anointing of Jehu who will render a total judgment upon the house of Ahab.

E. The Half-way Reform of Jehu

Part of the judgment on Jehoram was the divine commission of Jehu (a military commander) to overthrow Jehoram, wipe out the whole house of Ahab, and destroy Jezebel. Jehu faithfully executes this judgment, though perhaps in a more blood-thirsty manner than the LORD

³Ibid.

intended. This put an end to the house of Ahab, i.e., the Omni dynasty. Furthermore, it was a crushing blow to Baal worship: "Thus Jehu eradicated Baal out of Israel" (10:28). For his diligent reform, God rewarded him with the blessing that his dynasty would continue for at least four more generations.

Nevertheless, there is something lacking in Jehu's reform. Although he kills off all the worshippers of Baal, he is a self-centered individual who reinstitutes the sin of Jeroboam, even keeping the golden calves that were at Bethel and Dan (10:29-31). Jehu was obedient only in the areas he liked to obey. Consequently, God initiated new measures of discipline. Following the evaluation of Jehu, the text states:

"In those days the LORD began to cut off portions from Israel; and Hazael defeated them throughout the territory of Israel" (10:32).

Thus began a give and take confrontation with Syria that continued throughout Jehu's dynasty. Syria picked away at them, but God did not allow Syria to destroy His people because of the Abrahamic covenant (13:23)! Also, God had promised Jehu at least four generations to sit on the throne of Israel. During this period of the Jehu dynasty, the Syrians grew stronger and stronger, and the blows they inflicted on Israel became harder and harder. Eventually, Israel was brought to a reduced state with essentially only Samaria being left. In 803 BC, the people cried out for a deliverer, and God sent them one in the person of Adad-Nirari III (r. 810-783; see 2 Kgs 13:3-5). This Assyrian king defeated the Syrians, giving the Israelites a moment of respite. Significantly, God finally brought them to a point where they called upon Him. Unfortunately, it was short-lived and did not take root. Jeroboam II comes on the scene, and there is spiritual degeneration, although with economic prosperity. There is no lasting change of heart, and the Israelites just grew deeper in their sins. Each of the descendants of Jehu was corrupt, and when the fourth generation took the throne, God allowed his assassination.

F. The Conclusion

From this point on, the Northern Kingdom was one of complete political instability, with assassinations frequent. This also began the period of Assyrian menace. Under Menahem, Israel paid tribute, under Pekah they had lands captured and captives taken, and finally under Hoshea the capital was besieged and Assyria led Israel away into captivity. This was the final outworking of Deuteronomy 28, a fulfilment of the promise to Solomon (1 Kgs 9:6-9), and the fulfilment of God's prediction with Jeroboam (14:15). This judgment had been due since Jeroboam's reign and was now all the more full through the succeeding kings upon Israel's throne. The Assyrian captivity was not a result of the greater military superiority of Assyria, but a consequence of the sins of Israel (cf. 17:7ff).

IV. THE ROLE OF THE PROPHETS

This period of Israel's history could not be fully appreciated without taking into account the many prophets that God raised up. I will only briefly comment on a few.

A. Elisha

Whereas Elijah's role was more of confrontation with the Baal cult, Elisha's is primarily one of grace. The proper response to the ministry of grace is faith, and that is what Elisha is looking for. He finds it in numerous individuals, but unfortunately not in Jehoram.

B. Jonah

Jonah ministered as a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 780 BC). He answers the question: what happens to the Gentile world while God is disciplining His people, i.e., while they are out of blessing? Does He just forget about the Gentile world? The answer is "no." Jonah shows us that God sends out His own individual "missionaries" when He cannot use His people. God has not forgotten Ninevah and the Assyrians during this time of Israel's decline. As such, Jonah was carrying out that purpose of the nation to be mediators of blessing and the knowledge of YHWH to the Gentile world.

C. Amos (c. 760)

Amos also comes along during the reign of Jeroboam II. This was a period of upsurge in economic prosperity for Israel, which led to the conclusion that the nation could have spiritual degeneracy and still enjoy prosperity. But Amos raises a voice against this view and declares, "It will not last."

D. Isaiah

Isaiah wrote during the period 739-686 BC against the background of the Assyrian menace. He predicted the overthrow of the Northern Kingdom, while lifting up the hope that the Southern Kingdom would not fall to Assyria (ch 1–35). He goes on to predict that Judah would face the Babylonian captivity.

V. THE RELATION OF ISRAEL'S FALL TO THE COVENANTS

How does the fall of Israel in 722 BC to Assyria affect the promises of God in the biblical covenants?⁴ What about the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant? God has not violated His promises by allowing Israel to be led away into captivity. God is free to set aside a part of the people who are in unbelief as long as He maintains a remnant through whom He can work. There is still the Kingdom of Judah in the south, and there is still the line of David on the throne of that kingdom. The program will continue, because He still has a people to work through.

⁴Merrill gives 722 BC as the fall of Samaria (see *Kingdom of Priests*, 398). Leslie McFall gives the date as 723 BC ("A Translation Guide to the Data in Kings and Chronicles," *BibSac* 148:589 [Jan-Mar, 1991]: 35).