

Kings Behaving Badly

More Than Sunday School Material

There are a few books in both the Old and the New Testament that get overlooked when it comes to preparing the preaching program and 2 Kings is certainly among that group. It is not that the material in 2 Kings is totally unfamiliar. We know a few of the stories in there, we heard them when we were in Sunday School - the story of Elijah being taken up into heaven, Naaman being healed of his leprosy, or perhaps you remember the story of Josiah who came to the throne at the age of eight. That was always popular with the Sunday School class. But most people wonder what to do with the rest of it, and decide it is better to just leave it alone. Let the Sunday School teachers pick the best parts and don't worry about the other 22 chapters. But to confine this book to the Sunday School is a big mistake. It really is worth another look.

Preaching

I have been preaching my way through the books of the Old Testament chronologically. It has been a slow process - but it seemed to me to be the best way to approach it. There was no guessing as to what the next OT book would be. I must admit that I was a little daunted by the prospect of preaching on 2 Kings. I wasn't exactly sure how to handle the passages where you have a run of bad kings. It can get a bit boring to simply recount the reign of one terrible king after another.

Given that some of the prophets fit in with the message of 2 Kings (Amos and Hosea) I decided to blend these into the study of 2 Kings. I was not attempting to give a detailed examination of Amos or Hosea. I simply wanted to place their message into the historical setting.

The Structure of 2 Kings

It's difficult to separate 1 and 2 Kings. As far as the writer is concerned they are one work. Elijah forms a bridge between the two books as does the king Ahaziah. Identifying the structure of 2 Kings seems to get more difficult as you move through the book. A rough sketch would be like this:

1-2 - The transition from Elijah to Elisha

3-8 - The work of Elisha the Prophet

9-17 - The kingdoms of Israel and Judah culminating in the fall of Israel

18-25 - The Kingdom of Judah culminating in the fall of Judah.

Commentaries

The two commentaries I used were Russell Dilday's commentary in the *Mastering the Old Testament* series. This came highly recommended. But the commentary I found most useful was Iain Proven's in the *New International Biblical Commentary* series.

Sermon Outlines

Talk 1 - 2 Kings 1-2

Meanwhile Back In Israel

Main Point: God does not abandon his people. He is still their God. He still gives them a prophet to speak to them because he still has a plan - no matter how BLEAK things look. God has not abandoned this world. He has sent his Son. He has given us His Spirit. He has given us his word. (1 Cor 10:11-13)

INTRODUCTION

People seem to have a fascination with royalty - especially the English Royal Family. The OT is also fascinated with royalty. 20%+ of the OT deals with Kings. OT fascination is for a different reason. The kings weren't just celebrities. They were the leaders of God's people. They set the spiritual climate in the country.

WHERE ARE WE UP TO IN THE STORY

(I gave a quick rundown of where we are up to in the story of the OT from the Death of David, Solomon, Kingdom divides, down hill slide, etc to the opening of 2 Kings)

ELIJAH - GOD'S VOICE

The story of 1 Kings is a bleak one. It begins positively (with Solomon) but turns sour. Israel seems incapable of living as God's people. They'd rather ignore God and worship idols. Throughout it all God remains faithful to his people. He sends a prophet. In 1 Kings it was Elijah - the only glimmer of hope in an otherwise depressing story. Prophets represent God to man - the go-between. If they want to know what God thinks

they speak to the prophet. Through the Prophets God was with his people, speaking to them, guiding them, directing them, calling them back to himself.

AHAZIAH and ELIJAH

2 Kings opens with an incident showing the spiritual poverty in Israel. Ahaziah is sick and wants to know if he is going to recover. He tries to consult a foreign god. Elijah responds sarcastically (2 Kings 1:3). This is sadly typical of Israel. They'd rather consult foreign gods than speak to the one true God. Elijah tells the king he will not recover. Ahaziah orders Elijah to be killed but God is not going to allow the King to push around his prophet.

ELIJAH PASSES THE BATON TO ELISHA

Elijah's time as the prophet draws to a close and he passes the baton to Elisha. While the people abandon God he does not abandon them he still gives them a spokesman - someone who will speak to the people for God.

CONCLUSION

Is 2 Kings relevant in the 1990's? Yes! (see 1 Cor 10:6-13). The God we serve is the same God Elijah served. God's plan of salvation in Israel culminates in Jesus. We are the ones upon whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. We can look at Israel and be amazed at her unfaithfulness to God. But how faithful are we being in our relationship with God? Does your relationship with God shape the way you live your life? We can look at Israel and be surprised they refused to listen to God's spokesmen - the prophets. But how often do we fail to take seriously the things that God has said clearly to us in his word? How often do you open your Bible and read God's word?

We can look at the people Israel and be stunned at the godlessness of their behaviour. But what is your behaviour like?

When we see the Kings of Israel & Judah stumble we shouldn't be surprised - we should attempt to learn from their failure - learn so that we can live more faithful lives. As Paul says: "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." (2 Cor 10:12)

Talk 2 - 2 Kings 3-5

A Hearing Problem

Main Point: *God speaks but people don't always want to listen. It happened with Elisha and it happened with Jesus. NB it is often the most UNLIKELY people who respond to God's word and his messenger. This further highlights the unfaithfulness of his people. Don't go looking for a message from God when he has already clearly spoken.*

INTRODUCTION

Communication problems in marriage. (I recounted some humorous communication breakdowns in our marriage.) Communication problem between God and Israel. He was speaking but they were not listening. 2 Kings 3-5 stresses the importance of listening to God.

LISTENING TO GOD

Tricky passage to follow. Kings of Israel and Judah unite to fight the Moabites. Seven days into their march they realise they're out of water. Poor preparation but the worst thing is they have gone into battle without consulting God. Now that they're in trouble the King of Judah asks the King of Israel if there is a prophet they can consult. They call for Elisha, who is less than impressed (2 Kings 3:13). He finally tells them what to do and they manage to subdue Moab. God speaks to them through the prophet, they listen, obey and all is well.

ELISHA FURTHER PROVES HIS CREDENTIALS

2 Kings 4-5 we see Elisha further prove his credentials as a prophet in Israel. Two of these miracles deserve a closer examination.

(1) The Shunamite Woman

Elisha stayed at the home of a woman in Shunem when travelling through the area. The one thing that she did not have was a son. Elisha promises her a son. Some time later the son dies. The woman is bitter and angry with Elisha; however, he brings the boy back to life.

(2) Naaman

Naaman is the commander of the foreign army of Aram, married to an Israelite girl who says Elisha can cure him. The King of Aram sends Naaman to the King of Israel to be cured. What happens? (2 Kings 5:6-7). The King of Israel thinks it is a trick. He doesn't know anyone who could cure Naaman. (It's obviously ironic that a foreign king knows what Elisha can do.) Elisha tells Naaman to bathe in the Jordan. Naaman is angry. He is finally persuaded to do what Elisha says and he is cured. When Naaman is cured he wants to reward Elisha but Elisha knows that to accept the gift would be to take the credit. It was God who had healed Naaman.

BELIEVING - DOUBTING - BELIEVING

Common elements in both stories: (1) Elisha doing miraculous things (2) Both involve faith, doubt and finally listening to God. But in the end both come to the realisation that Naaman expresses in 2 Kings 5:15. How sad Israel can't come to that point. How sad Israel is unable to hear what God is saying. How sad that Israel can't get beyond her disbelief. How sad that they can't place their trust in God. He is speaking to them through Elisha - but they refuse to listen.

GOD 'S FINAL WORD

Elisha clearly points us to another one that God would send - another one that he wants us to listen to - Jesus. Elisha raises a boy from the dead. Jesus raised Jairus' daughter, widows son, Lazarus and himself. Elisha fed 100 men - Jesus fed 5 000. Elisha heals one man of leprosy. Jesus heals 10 men simply with a word. At the transfiguration God said: "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him." (see also Heb 1:1-2.) God has spoken definitively to this world through his son. Jesus is God's final word. Are we listening? Do you want to hear what God has to say? Then open your Bible - hear what his son has to say.

TALK 3 - 2 Kings 6-13

When God Speaks You'd Better Listen

Main Point: The message of the Gospel is a message of JUDGEMENT and HOPE. For those who don't respond - be ready for judgement. For those who do - there is great hope. The chance to enjoy God's BLESSING is there - IN JESUS.

INTRODUCTION

Most people think God is like a senile old man who sits on the throne in heaven. They think if God were ever to judge he would only punish evil people like Adolf Hitler, child molesters and the people who invented TAZO'S. The Bible says God is creator, ruler and judge. He blesses those who trust him and punishes those who oppose or reject him.

ELISHA CAPTURES ENTIRE ARMY

An amazing story of God's control. Elijah leads the entire Aramean army blind into Israel's territory. God has shown Israel again that he has got everything under control. All the people of Israel need to do is trust him.

THE ARAMEANS AT IT AGAIN

The capital city of Israel is surrounded by Arameans. Things are so desperate the people have resorted to cannibalism. The King of Israel this time decides that it is all Elisha's fault and that he is going to KILL him. Elisha tells him that the FAMINE will be over the NEXT DAY and that they will be selling GRAIN at the city gate. God uses four lepers to bring about what he said in an amazing story.

WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

Now what are we supposed to make of all this? I think the answer is again reasonably simple. God wants to bless Israel. All they need to do is trust him. They have nothing to fear from their enemies. God has protected them and provided for them. They should trust him. But sadly Israel seems unable to learn that lesson. They remain hard hearted.

GOD PUNISHES THOSE WHO OPPOSE HIM

God is able to bless those who trust him he is also determined to punish those who oppose him. See 2 Kings 9-10. (Look back to 1 Kings for background to this story). We may be stunned by the brutality of stories like this - shocked God would want all those people killed. Make sure you see the whole picture. God is not punishing them for some "one-off" offence. It is not as though they slipped up once and God has come down hard on them. And it is not as though they have repented and God has refused to forgive them. God is punishing those who have persistently defied him. They have had countless opportunities to repent. Instead of repenting they have drifted further into sin. They have continued to spit in the face of God and live lives they know God hated. The time has come when God says enough. He is not being spiteful or vindictive in punishing.

THE DEATH OF ELISHA

Elisha dies. Cute epilogue (2 Kings 13:20-21). Even after death Elisha shows what God wanted to do for Israel- give them life - yet they refused to listen. Elisha dies and sadly there is no-one directly appointed to take his place. Elisha is dead and the Kingdom of Israel is looking more shaky than ever.

CONCLUSION

Some people (non-Christians especially) dislike the idea of a God who judges. God wants nothing more than to bless those who trust him. But he will certainly punish those who oppose him. Some think there's a difference between the God of the OT and NT. They think in the NT God has mellowed. This shows a poor understanding of the Bible. It is the same God throughout. See John 3:16 - God will bless those who trust and punish those who oppose. God's overwhelming desire is to give life to those who will trust in his son - but he will not allow people to reject his son.

Talk 4 - 2 Kings 14-15 (Amos)

Kings Behaving Badly

Main Point: *Israel felt comfortable about how things were going - but her behaviour was not that befitting God's people. As disciples of Jesus are we living lives that are befitting of who we are?*

INTRODUCTION

There's an ABC TV program called "Men Behaving Badly" - a comedy about two male slob who are insensitive to girlfriends, messy and disorganized. Frustrating part is they don't think they are behaving badly. They think their girlfriends should be proud to have such men. You could call this section of 2 Kings "Kings Behaving Badly". The kings are continually doing the wrong thing, and the frustrating thing is that they don't think they're doing anything wrong. They think they've got it under control.

JUDAH 3 - ISRAEL 0

The regular summaries of the reigns of each king follow a set formula: (1) Kings name, and the name of the counterpart in the other Kingdom, (2) Father's name, (3) Length of reign, (4) Evil or good and (5) Significant things from their reign. (I put a chart on the back of the notice sheet showing each of the kings with a tick beside the good and a cross beside the bad. The Judah 3 - Israel 0 referred to the fact there were 3 good kings in Judah and none in Israel.)

THE MESSAGE OF AMOS

Media coverage of events overseas is more powerful when they have the "up-close and personal" stories - an interviewer in a refugee camp, a reporter up at the front of a battle. Amos gives us the "up-close and personal" account of what things are like in Israel. Amos was called by God to tell Israel to repent. Lets have a quick look at what is going on in Israel from Amos' perspective.

(1) Look at the way you're living

Amos draws attention to the injustice in Israel and the plight of the poor.

(2) Going through the motions of worship

Amos shows them that their worship of God is hollow and meaningless. God hates that kind of worship (Amos 5:21-24).

(3) If you don't repent...

Amos' main role is to warn them about what will happen if they don't repent (5:14-15). But the High Priest - the man who is supposed to represent the people to God - doesn't want to hear what Amos says (7:12-13).

THE PROBLEM WITH ISRAEL

Israel's problem can be summed up in two words: complacency and hypocrisy. They were comfortable and slack in their relationship with God. They take God for granted. There's a similar problem in churches today - people who take God and their salvation for granted. There are plenty of churches where people are going through the motions of a relationship with God. But God wants us to be serious about him.

Talk 5 - 2 Kings 16-17, Hosea

The Fall of Israel

Main Point: *Having a relationship with God is about FAITHFULNESS. NB the CHURCH is seen as the BRIDE OF CHRIST. Are we being a faithful wife to Jesus? What should a faithful wife be like?*

INTRODUCTION

(I made up a story about marital unfaithfulness to illustrate its devastating effects.) Unfaithfulness in marriage can be a devastating thing for all concerned. That is how God describes Israel's relationship with him. She has been totally unfaithful.

MEANWHILE BACK IN JUDAH

Before looking at the fall of Israel lets see how things are going in Judah. With the reign of Ahaz we are told this: 2 Kings 16:2-3a. We now have a king in Judah who is just like the kings of Israel. With Israel is about to go under this is not a good sign.

THE LAST PROPHET TO ISRAEL

In the midst of Israel's continued unfaithfulness God sends one more prophet to call them to repent. Hosea is called to marry a prostitute as a living illustration of what Israel have done to God. Gomer runs off and Hosea is told to go after her and buy her back.

ANOTHER PROPHET IGNORED

Israel ignores the message of Hosea. Israel is captured by Assyrians and becomes Assyrian territory. Another strange episode at the end of this section. God sends lions to attack the Assyrians living in the land. The Assyrian king sends an Israelite priest back to the land to teach the people how to worship God. (2 Kings 17:25-28)

THE AUTOPSY REPORT

* An autopsy is often done to determine the cause of death. 2 Kings 17:7-23 gives us the autopsy report for the death of Israel. They died of TERMINAL UNFAITHFULNESS. Despite every attempt on God's part to bring them back to faithfulness the people refused.

HOSEA, JESUS AND US

The story of Hosea and Gomer is a sad, pathetic one. The NT uses the image of a bride to illustrate the relationship between Jesus and the church. Jesus has to buy his bride. How faithful are we in responding to what Jesus has done for us? Jesus has demonstrated overwhelming devotion to us in that he was willing to die on the cross so we could be his. How would you measure your level of faithfulness to him? The wonderful thing about what Jesus has done for us is that our salvation is secure in him. It does not depend on our faithfulness - it depends on trusting in the one who is totally faithful. Our salvation depends upon the faithfulness of Jesus. But the only appropriate response to what Jesus has done for us is to live faithfully in our relationship with him.

Talk 6 - 2 Kings 18-21

A Glimmer of Hope

Main Point: *What Israel need is a faithful king who will reign forever. What God gives us in Jesus is a faithful king who lives and reigns forever.*

INTRODUCTION

A teacher warning children not to misbehave doesn't really have much impact until the first child is punished. Once one child has been punished the others seem to sit up and take notice. Israel has now gone into exile never to return. Will Judah heed the warning?

HEZEKIAH ON THE THRONE

Hezekiah is the best king to sit on the throne in Judah since David. He does all the right things - removes idols, gets serious about God.

WHO DO YOU TRUST?

Hezekiah and the people are faced with a TEST. Assyrians are threatening to attack Judah. The King of Assyria gives them one chance to surrender. Judah's choice: Surrender to those who took captive Israel or trust God. They've seen how powerful the Assyrian king is. Can they trust God? (NB the Assyrian king is making "god-like" offers of a promised land.) They trust God and he sends Assyrians packing.

HEZEKIAH FALLS ILL

Hezekiah becomes ill - he's going to die. Judah's future is again up in the air. What will the next king be like? With Hezekiah on the throne, things have been great. Hezekiah pleads with God. God allows him to recover and reign another 15 years. This is great news for the people of Judah - a good and faithful King for another 15 years.

MANASSEH - A SON UNLIKE HIS FATHER

Hezekiah finally dies. If Hezekiah's reign had been one of the high points in Judah's history, then his son Manasseh's reign is certainly the lowest. He did evil - and did it for 55 years. The worst and the longest serving king of Judah. Hopes for Judah had been raised with Hezekiah but they have been dashed with Manasseh.

CONCLUSION

A bleak conclusion to what started as a positive section. Two things give hope. Two things tell us God is not finished yet.

(1) A GOD WHO CAN BE TRUSTED

The incident with the Assyrians shows that God can be trusted.

(2) A KING WHO LIVES FOREVER

Reading this section you can't help but think that if Hezekiah had lived longer - or even forever - that things would have been better. God's people need a faithful king on the throne forever. That is what Hezekiah points us toward. (Hezekiah was on his death bed and God said "Three days and you will be well again". Look ahead to another who died, and then three days later rose from the dead.) What we see in Hezekiah is just a shadow of what we will see in Jesus. Jesus is the faithful king on the throne over God's people, who reigns forever.

Talk 7 - 2 Kings 22-25

The End of the Kingdom?

Main Point: *The failure of the Kings. Despite what happened in Israel Judah is unable to learn the lesson. The Kings are UNFAITHFUL. They lead the people astray. The Kingdom has come to an end - or has it? What will God do? He will send his Son to bring in a NEW kingdom.*

INTRODUCTION

In a court case a verdict can be given and a sentence passed and there is some time between the sentence being passed and actually commencing. The verdict and sentence have been passed on Judah - but we are still waiting for the sentence to begin.

JOSIAH AND THE BOOK OF THE LAW

But before we do see the sentence begin, one more unusual piece of evidence is presented - the reign of Josiah at the age of eight. Mind boggling that an eight-year-old should take the throne. At age 18, Josiah finds the book of the Law. He's stunned by what he reads, and realises people have fallen short of God's standard. He renews the covenant and begins reforms. (NB the amazing thing is Josiah knew God was still going to punish Israel for the sins of Manasseh. He didn't undertake the reforms to avert God's anger but because it was the right thing to do.) Josiah dies. Even the best king ends his days the same as the worst.

THE WHEELS FINALLY FALL OFF

Following death of Josiah we see finally the death of Judah. A few changes in the throne - but really just the death throes for Judah.

AN AMBIGUOUS ENDING

Is that the end for God's people? Has God finally given up? Jehoiachin is a slave in Babylon, and 2 Kings 25:27-30 offers a note of hope. God promised that David's kingdom would be an eternal kingdom (2 Sam 7:16). God is not finished yet.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM 2 KINGS?

(1) Take God's Word Seriously

What was Israel and Judah's greatest failing? Not their idolatry. Not their oppression of poor. Not their immorality. It was their failure to listen to God's word. See Mark 9:7, Hebrews 1:1-2 and 1 Timothy 3:16-17. God has spoken. We need to take his word seriously.

(2) God is Faithful

God is faithful to his promises. David's throne is eternal. Jesus now sits on that throne. The story of 2 Kings - for all the UNFAITHFULNESS and HOPELESSNESS - points us to a God who is FAITHFUL. And it points us to the coming of Jesus. ■

*Luke Tattersall is the minister of
Mullumbimby Presbyterian Church
on the North Coast of New South Wales, Australia.*