

2 KINGS

Part Two: Judah Final Years (Chapters 18-25)

Now that the northern kingdom has been conquered by the Assyrians and the people taken into exile, the author turns his attention to the last years of the kingdom of Judah. The reign of the kings treated in this article is the historical context for the preaching of several of the pre-exilic prophets such as Isaiah (chs. 1-39), Micah and Jeremiah.

CHAPTER 18: Hezekiah—finally a king who places his trust in God

The next three chapters of 2Kings will focus on Hezekiah. Chapters 18-19 could be titled *God versus Sennacherib* and chapter 20 deals with Hezekiah's illness. After reading about the kings in both Samaria and Judah, who did "what was evil in the eyes of the Lord," it is a welcome change to meet a king who does what is good in the eyes of the Lord.

Verses 3-8. Hezekiah is portrayed as the 'darling' of the Deuteronomist writer. He removes the high places, shatters the pillars, and cuts down the sacred poles. He puts his trust in the God of Israel, rebels against the king of Assyria, and refuses to serve him.

Verses 13-37. Sennacherib invades Judah. A dialog is carried on about whom to trust: Hezekiah and his God or the powerful king of Assyria. Hezekiah looks weak and very vulnerable, whereas the Assyrians whose past victories are recounted seem powerful and strong. Hezekiah tries to buy off the Assyrians but his offer does not work. Despite the odds against Hezekiah, the Deuteronomist writer is very clear: fidelity to God and his covenant will bring success, no matter what the odds. Trust in a foreign power will only bring disaster. When the Assyrian frontmen ask: "Has any of the gods of the nations ever rescued their land from the king of Assyria?" (v.33), the tension rises and we wonder what Hezekiah will do.

CHAPTER 19: Hezekiah and Isaiah; the Assyrians are struck down

"Do not be frightened by the words you have heard." (v.6)

Verses 1-19. Frightened by the words of the Assyrians, Hezekiah consults with his prophet Isaiah who tells him "not to be afraid...for the Lord will

cause his enemy to die by the sword" (vv 6-7). When the Assyrians repeat their threats, Hezekiah turns to the Lord in prayer (vv 15-19).

Verses 20-32. These verses consist of three oracles by Isaiah. The first oracle (vv 21-28) "is a taunting poem exposing Sennacherib's arrogance and the folly of his godlike pretensions, contrasting his boasting with his fate" (Richard Nelson). It ends with the Lord saying: "I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and make you return the way you came" (v. 28). The second oracle (vv 29-31) offers Hezekiah a symbolic guarantee that God's word will come true. The third oracle (vv 32-34) turns to the immediate crisis. God will protect the city for the sake of David.

Verses 35-37. Commenting on these verses in his commentary on Kings, Richard Nelson writes:

"The stakes are high, raised to the limit by Assyrian arrogance and God's oracles offered in response. Simply stated, the issue is whether the God of Israel is really God after all. Sennacherib's word (vv 6, 16, 18:28) stands directly opposed to the word of the Lord. 'Thus says the Lord' (vv 6, 20, 32) cannot be true if 'thus says the great king, the king of Assyria' (18:19) is permitted to stand. God's honor is at stake" (vv 15-19, 21-28), (p. 241).

At night, the angel of the Lord comes and strikes down the arrogant Assyrians. In reality, the Assyrians may have been afflicted by a mysterious plague—which, of course, would have been attributed to God. The survivors go home knowing that there is a God who can save his people against great odds from their mighty power. The narrative is all about a call to trust God in a time of disaster. Hezekiah, with the help of Isaiah, places his trust in God, and God wins their battle just as he had at the Red Sea. The exiles in Babylon need very much to hear the above story. If Jerusalem falls, it must be because its inhabitants ceased to trust God.

Pause: Can you recall a time when God came through when the odds were stacked against you?

CHAPTER 20: Hezekiah's illness

"I have heard your prayer and seen your tears." (v.5)

When Isaiah hears that Hezekiah is ill, he believes that he is going to die. But when Hezekiah prays, God has mercy on him and gives him fifteen more years. The shadow on the sundial moving back ten steps is a sign that both Hezekiah's and Judah's years are prolonged (vv 9-11).

Verses 12-21—Hezekiah welcomes envoys from Babylon. When envoys come from Babylon to congratulate Hezekiah on his great victory, he proudly shows them all his treasures. Hezekiah's hospitality to the Babylonians may have been motivated by his desire to cozy up to a new world power. Isaiah uses the occasion to prophecy Babylon's eventual victory over Judah. *"The time is coming when all that is in your house...shall be carried off to Babylon. Some of your own bodily descendants shall be taken and made servants in the palace of the king of Babylon"* (vv 17-18). Hezekiah's reaction to Isaiah's prophecy manifests the only negative thing about him in these chapters. He tells Isaiah that the Lord's word is favorable, meaning that the bad times will only come after he is gone (v.19). His attitude is a bit like those who say: "If social security lasts as long as I am alive, I am happy."

CHAPTER 21: Manasseh, worst king ever

Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, has the distinction of being Judah's longest serving king (45 years) and also the most wicked one. *"He rebuilt the high places which his father had destroyed. He erected altars to Baal...he immolated his son by fire..."* (vv 3-6). In verses 13-15, God speaks of the punishment that will come to Jerusalem and its inhabitants due to Manasseh's sin.

Verses 19-26. Manasseh's son was no better than his father. *"He followed exactly the path his father had trod, serving and worshipping the idols his father served"* (v.21).

Pause: Manasseh and Amon, respectively, had a father and grandfather who set a great example of how a king should lead the nation in respecting God's laws. How could Hezekiah's son and grandson turn out to be such horrible leaders?

CHAPTER 22: Josiah, best king ever

"Josiah pleased the Lord and conducted himself unswervingly just as his ancestor David had done." (v.2)

"The high priest Hilkiah said, I have found the book of the law in the temple of the Lord" (v. 9).

Josiah was only eight years old when he became king. In his eighteenth year, he orders a renovation of the Temple (vv 3-7).

Verses 8-20—The book of the law is found. During the process of renovating the temple, the priest Hilkiah finds the book of the law. It is generally accepted that the book is either all or at least part of the book of Deuteronomy. When the contents of the book are read to Josiah, he tears his garments (a gesture of repentance) and orders Hilkiah to *"go, consult the Lord for me, for the people, for all Judah, about the stipulations of the book..."* (vv 11-13).

Even though Jeremiah lived during this period, the prophet consulted is an unknown woman named Huldah. She authenticates the contents of the book—that the curses and the infidelity found therein will come to Judah and Jerusalem, but not in Josiah's time for he is one who obeys God. Huldah affirms that despite the reforms brought about by Josiah (ch. 23), they are not enough to stop God from his decision to send Judah into exile. We understand God's decision when we read how Josiah's successors turned their backs on God.

CHAPTER 23: Josiah's religious reform

"Standing by the column, the king made a covenant before the Lord that they would follow him and observe his ordinances, statues and decrees with their whole hearts and souls, thus reviving the terms of the covenant which were written in this book. And all the people stood as participants in the covenant." (v.3)

After hearing the tough words contained in the newly found book of the law, Josiah sets in motion three big initiatives to bring about religious reform in Judah:

- He calls the people together and renews their covenant with the Lord (v.3).
- He cleanses the nation of all symbols of pagan worship (vv 4-20). As we read these verses, we see

that Josiah leaves no stone unturned—even the pagan symbols built by Solomon are destroyed. The reform even extends to Samaria and Bethel in the northern kingdom. “*Readers were expected to react with horror at how deeply apostasy had penetrated the nation*” (Richard Nelson).

- The celebration of the Passover is reestablished (vv 21-24).

Summing up Josiah’s efforts to bring religious reform to Judah, the Deuteronomist writer states: “*Before him there had been no king who turned to the Lord as he did, with his whole heart, his whole soul, and his whole strength, in accord with the entire law of Moses; nor could any after him compare with him*” (v. 25).

Josiah’s religious reform dies with him. As we shall see, his successors all do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. The Egyptians assert their control over Judah by deposing Josiah’s successor Jehoahaz and taking him into exile (v.33).

Pause: Which of the reforms of Vatican 2 have you liked the most? What other forms of religious renewal do we still need in our church?

CHAPTERS 24-25: Judah is exiled from the land

“*He deported all Jerusalem: all the officers and men of the army, ten thousand in number, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None were left among the people of the land except the poor.*” (24:14)

Introducing his commentary on these final two chapters of 2Kings, Richard Nelson writes:

“*These last chapters of Kings chronicle the violent dismantling of the nation of Judah. The institutions launched so gloriously by Solomon at the beginning of the book have gradually decayed, chapter by chapter. Now the pace of dissolution snowballs. Judah collapses under the punitive brutality of two Babylonian invasions.*

“*The writer pulls no punches in describing this final catastrophe. By the time the reader reaches the last sentence of this section (25:26), the absolute worst has happened. The kings after David’s line are in prison (24:12; 25:7). The skilled and useful classes of Judah’s society have been exiled (24:14-16; 25:11) or killed (25:18-21), leaving only the peasantry (25:12). The city and temple have been burned, the wall demolished (25:9-10), the last remnants of Solomonic*

greatness broken up, melted down, and taken away (24:13, 25:13-17)” (p.261).

In chapter 24, we read how the last kings of Judah are defeated by the Babylonians and taken into exile.

In chapter 25, the last king Zedekiah foolishly seeks to battle the powerful forces of Babylon. He is defeated, his sons are killed before his eyes and he is taken to Babylon.

25:8-17 describe the sad story of the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon’s temple and palace. “*He burned the house of the Lord, the palace of the king, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every large building was destroyed by fire*” (v.9).

After the writer names some of the other people who were taken into exile (vv 18-20), he simply finishes by saying: “*Thus was Judah exiled from her land*” (v.21).

The opening verses of the book of *Lamentations* poetically describe Jerusalem’s state after she is destroyed.

*How lonely she is now,
the once crowded city!
Widowed is she
who was mistress over nations;
The princess among the provinces
has been made a toiling slave.*

*Bitterly she weeps at night,
tears upon her cheeks,
With not one to console her
of all her dear ones;
Her friends have all betrayed her
and become her enemies.*

*Judah has fled into exile
from oppression and cruel slavery;
Yet where she lives among the nations
she finds no place to rest:
All her persecutors come upon her
where she is narrowly confined.*

*The roads to Zion mourn
for lack of pilgrims going to her feasts;
All her gateways are deserted,
her priests groan,
Her virgins sigh;
she is in bitter grief.*

(vv 1-4)

Verses 27-30—Release of Jehoiachin from prison.

In the thirty-seventh year of Jehoiachin's exile, the new king of Babylon releases him from prison. (Granting amnesty on the occasion of a new king's inauguration was a relatively common practice in the ancient Near East.) He is invited to eat at the king's table. At least some scholars see in this event a sign of hope for Israel.

Judah, in exile away from her land and religious center, has clearly failed to be faithful to her covenant with God. Yet in this dark hour, there is a glimmer of hope. But the hope is not in the Davidic kings who never reigned in Jerusalem again. Richard Nelson writes: *"The promise of an eternal Davidic dynasty points straight out into the void, unfulfilled in any political sense. Christians, however, see this promise as charged with new meaning by the reign of Jesus.Kings concludes with God's options held wide open. In this, the book is a paradigm of all biblical faith. The key to the future lies with God alone. The experience of both Israel and the church testifies that the God of the Bible is the God of surprise happy endings and amazing grace. This is, after all, the God who raised Jesus from the dead"* (ibid p.269).

Pause: Other than 9/11, what has been the greatest destruction that has befallen our country in your lifetime? What helps a nation to recover from such a horrible experience?

RESOURCES:

- Colledgeville Bible Commentary, Old Testament
- Interpretation Series—First and Second Kings, Richard Nelson
- The Daily Study Bible Series, Graeme Auld
- The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition