

2 KINGS: A Wasted Life

by Ray C. Stedman

In the Hebrew Bible the books of First and Second Kings are combined into one book of Kings. They are quite aptly named Kings, as they trace the lives of various rulers of God's kingdom, beginning with Saul and David, down through the division of the kingdom under Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Then these two books trace out for us the various dynasties in Israel, the northern kingdom, and the single dynasty of the house of David in the southern kingdom of Judah. In each case, the spotlight is always on the king; it is what the king does in relationship to God that determines how the nation goes. The character of the kingdom is largely determined by the character of the king. When the king walked with God in obedience and humility, and worshipped and obeyed God in the temple in Jerusalem (or later in Samaria in the northern kingdom), God's blessing in prosperity and victory rested upon the kingdom. There was no such blessing for the northern kingdom because they had no godly kings. But in the southern kingdom, in the house of David, there was victory and prosperity when godly kings appeared from time to time. The rains came at the right times and the crops grew. The economy of the land flourished. There was victory over their enemies, even when the enemies came against them in allied forces. There was always victory when the king walked with God.

But when the king disobeyed and worshipped other gods, immediately famines broke out, droughts came, and invasions occurred. The land fell into difficult and extremely serious conditions. When the kings were in obedience, they were always types of Christ – such as David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Joash, and Jehoshaphat. They pictured something of the sovereign, kingly reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. But when they were in disobedience,

they were types, or pictures of the antichrist, the man of sin who is yet to appear upon the earth. This was the antichrist of whom Jesus himself said to Israel, "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive," (John 5:43 RSV). It is this man of sin, the quintessence of human evil, that is pictured by the kings of Israel and Judah when they walk in disobedience.

The thing that makes these books perennially fascinating to us is that this kingdom in Israel is a picture to each of us of the kingdom in our own lives. The nation of Israel was picked out particularly from the nations to be a representative of the individual human life. God chose Israel. Israel did not come into the position of prominence and favor in God's sight by their own efforts. God chose them. He formed them and molded them and produced a nation that would be a sample to all the world of what God is willing to do in any individual's life. As we read these books, we will find ourselves right in the midst of the problems and blessings and possibilities that are reflected in these books of the kings.

From the beginning there were always two divisions in the monarchy. Even under David this was true. When David first came to the throne, he was king only of Judah for seven years. It was not until after that seven-year reign that he became king over both divisions of the nation. This division between the ten tribes in the north and the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south, where Jerusalem was located, existed right from the very start. Now it was intended to be this way, but they were all to be under one king. They represent the divisions in the human life. Everyone knows that there are two evident divisions of human life:

1. First of all, there is the body of which we are so aware. We take it around with us. We spend our time taking care of it, primping it, dressing it up, painting it, unpainting it, and doing all the things necessary to keep it looking good. Unfortunately most of life seems to be spent in taking care of the body. But, of course, there is more than a body to each man.
2. There is also the soul, the invisible part that contains the personality, and is so obviously gone when we look at the emptiness of a corpse and the terrible tragedy of death.

Here in the two kingdoms this division of life is acted out. The ten tribes of the north are representative of the body, while Judah and Benjamin, the two tribes of the south, represent the soul. It was in the southern kingdom that the capital city of Jerusalem was located, and the temple was in Jerusalem, and God dwelt in the temple.

We know from the Scriptures that in the human life there is not only a body and soul, but within the soul – so closely linked to it that only the Word of God can divide between the soul and the spirit – is this dwelling place of God. It is there that the Holy Spirit takes up his residence when he comes into the human heart. When this happens, man is as God intended man to be. Without the Holy Spirit dwelling in the human spirit, man is only an incomplete example of what he is supposed to be. But when God the Holy Spirit comes in, he takes up his residence in the human spirit, the temple of the body. In the New Testament, this figure is drawn for us as we are told that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). If we permit the Spirit of God to dwell within our human spirit he governs our soul, thereby adjusting and controlling the body and the outward life.

This temple of the Spirit was in Jerusalem and all the worship of the kingdom was to be there. It was never to be in any other place. There in the temple in Jerusalem God had put his name. Likewise, in each human being the human spirit is to be the temple, the place of worship. Remember what the Lord Jesus said to the woman at the well about the nature of God? “God is Spirit,” he said, “and those who worship him must worship [where?] in spirit and truth” {John 4:24 RSV}, “for such the Father seeks to worship him,” {John 4:23b RSV}. He can find lots of worshipers who are worshipping

him in soul – mere soulish, emotional worship. But he is not interested in that. He is looking for that worship which is centered in the deepest part of human nature, in the spirit, and this is figured by the temple.

In your kingdom your will is king and nothing can take place in your kingdom except as it passes by the authority of your will. Therefore, what your will does, determines what your life will be like. If you willingly, obediently yield yourself to the influences brought into your life by the Holy Spirit dwelling in your human spirit, you are like the kingdom when David walked with God. The land flourished in abundance and prosperity and the influence of that little kingdom reached out to the uttermost parts of the earth. But if, like many of the following kings, you walk in disobedience – if your will is defiant, and is set against the things of God; if you refuse his sovereignty and dominion in your life – then the same kind of evil invasions that fell upon this kingdom will come into your life. You will no longer have any strength to repel the inward corruptions that ruin and take their toll upon your life and the lives of those you influence. Thus the kingdom falls into ruin.

As we trace this ruin we notice that Solomon, the son of David, introduced the principle that began the deterioration of the kingdom. He fell in love with the daughter of Pharaoh. There was nothing wrong in his falling in love. God approves of that. But there was something definitely wrong with his falling in love with the daughter of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the king of all Egypt, the very place from which God in grace and power had redeemed his people. (Egypt in Scripture is always a type or a picture of the world’s allurements to the human heart.) When Solomon brought the daughter of Pharaoh into his court, the door was open for alliances with other lovely girls in the tribes around Israel. Soon he had a thousand wives and along with them came their idols. The kingdom began to deteriorate under Solomon because he allowed the world to entice and allure him, to draw away his heart’s interest from the temple where his worship should have been centered. You can draw the parallel picture in your own life.

Then Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, actually split the kingdom so that the northern ten tribes were removed from the southern two tribes and a separate kingdom was set up in the north. If the northern kingdom is representative, as I have suggested,

of a man's body, then when our spirit loses fellowship with the Holy Spirit within, it isn't very long before the body begins to disintegrate. Fleshly indulgence sets in and bodily wrongdoing soon follows, as the first chapter of Romans tells us.

Then came Jeroboam, the son of Rehoboam. It was Jeroboam who introduced the great sin for which the northern kingdom was noted. Jeroboam set up two calves in Bethel and Dan to be the worship centers. Remember, when the Israelites were down at the foot of Mt. Sinai and Moses had gone up to the mountain to receive the Law, Aaron the priest led the people in the building of a calf of gold which they began to worship. And they called it Jehovah (Exod 32:5). It wasn't that they were denying Jehovah, their God. They were misrepresenting him by this calf which was like the gods of the other nations. They were calling it by the name of the true God. This was an abomination in the sight of God and was eliminated from the nation until the days of Jeroboam when he introduced the two calves of gold and said, "These be your gods, Israel. Worship here," (1 Ki 12:28).

This represents that form of godliness which denies the power of God. It is an outward conformity to Christian faith which lacks the inner response of the Spirit. It is quite possible to make a very good appearance of being a Christian – so much so, in fact, that you fool everybody but God. You can come to church, you can stand when everybody stands, sit down when everybody sits down, hold the hymn book at the right angle, bow your head at the proper prescribed angle and at the proper prescribed time, but inwardly there is no worship at all. This is exactly what is pictured here in the worship which Jeroboam the son of Nebat introduced into the northern kingdom.

From that moment on, these two kings, David and Jeroboam, become the representatives of the two spiritual principles that are traced throughout the kingdoms. They become the measuring sticks for the kings that followed. Time and time again in these books we read that a king either walked in the ways of David his father and served the Lord his God – tearing down all the false and abominable worship that Israel had fallen into – or they say he walked in the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and caused Israel to go whoring after the gods that Jeroboam had set up. Now in Israel, the northern kingdom, there were no godly kings. There was just a continual succession of kings murdering their

predecessors to gain the throne. But from time to time, God in his grace intervened by sending prophets in an effort to arrest the fall of the northern kingdom. In Judah, the southern kingdom, there were a few godly kings and these men stand out like lights in the darkness – the primary ones were Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

All through this time of decline God made various efforts to stop the corruption and decay of the kingdom. These centered largely on the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. The books of Kings are primarily noteworthy for the ministry of these two mighty prophets of God. (God never spoke to the nation through a king. He used the king in government, to control and to administer justice. The life and the character of the kingdom was due to the reflected character of the king.) When God wanted to speak to the nation, he sent a prophet. Hosea, Amos, Joel, Isaiah and Jeremiah were also prophets that ministered to the kingdoms, but the only ones that appear in First and Second Kings are Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah was a rugged personality. He went around wearing a leather girdle and dressed in haircloth. What a scraggly, mangy person he must have looked – a rugged, tough character. Time after time, he met the king face to face to deliver a message of judgment and his life was at stake many times. But he was faithful and God protected him. We have the wonderful story of how he met with 400 priests of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel and single-handedly defied the power of this abominable worship in Israel (1 Ki 18:20). He challenged them to a contest as to who could bring down fire from heaven. In a most remarkable scene he taunted them as they went about cutting their flesh and crying out to their god to send down fire, saying to them, "What is the matter? Where is your god? Is he out to lunch? Has he gone on a journey? Is he asleep? Why doesn't he answer?" When they had exhausted themselves, he called down fire from Jehovah that licked up not only the sacrifice, but the water that had been poured upon it and the very stones of the altar. Everything was gone. He won a mighty triumph for God. This was the character of Elijah. He was primarily the prophet of the Law. It was his ministry to bring the thunderings of the Law to the nation Israel, to try to wake it up to its shameful condition. Therefore, his was a ministry of love and of fire and of judgment.

When Elijah was caught up into heaven in a chariot of fire, his mantle fell upon Elisha. In contrast to Elijah, Elisha's ministry was the ministry of grace and sweetness and glory throughout Israel. Now why was this?

Well, if you study this carefully you will see that these two men together prefigure the ministry of Jesus Christ. When the Lord Jesus came to Israel, it was in a period of decay and corruption, as it was when Elijah came to the nation. Herod was on the throne as a vassal of Rome. The high priest's office had gone into the hands of the Sadducees (who were the rationalists of that day) and they had turned the temple into a place of corruption and commerce. The nation had fallen into dark and bitter times:

- The Lord Jesus' ministry to official Israel was in the power of Elijah. He began his ministry with the cleansing of the temple as he made a whip of many cords and, with his arm bared and his eyes flashing fire (gentle Jesus – meek and mild), drove the money changers out of the temple, turning over the tables and flinging the stuff out into the courtyard. That also marked the close of his ministry in thundering judgment to official Israel.
- But our Lord's ministry to the individual was the ministry of Elisha – the ministry of grace, of winsome sweetness, of compassionate tenderness and helpfulness.

There is another interesting comparison here, in that Elisha also seems to picture the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church after the day of Pentecost; Elisha's ministry also began with a man ascending into heaven. Elisha's very first miracle depicted the ministry of the Holy Spirit – the putting of salt into the water and the sweetening of the water. The miracle concerning salt, the miracle of the oil that kept flowing continually – which is another symbol of the Holy Spirit – and the miracle of the water suddenly appearing in the parched and barren famine-stricken fields all picture the Holy Spirit. Then, also, there was the miracle of resurrection when the little boy who died was raised from the dead as Elisha lay his staff upon him and breathed on his face. This was not mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It was a genuine resurrection. Elisha also performed the miracles of healing leprosy, of feed-

ing a thousand or more people, and of recovering the lost iron ax head by making it float on top of the water. Miracles continued even after he was dead and buried. A group of men trying to dispose of a body were suddenly surprised by a mob of bandits. They threw the body into the tomb of Elijah and when the body of the dead man touched the bones of Elijah the man sprang back to life again. Why? All of this indicates the ministry of the Holy Spirit in a decadent life trying to win back a heart that has gradually drifted into the blindness and darkness of corruption. Even when everything looks dead and absolutely gone, the Holy Spirit is still able to transform death into life by a touch.

The book of Second Kings traces the decline of these kingdoms, and Israel goes first. It is taken captive by Assyria, and, under Shalmaneser, the northern kingdom is carried away into total and final captivity as we read in Chapter 17, Verses 13 through 18:

Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets." But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenants that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols, and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Asherah [that is, a sex god], and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only. {2 Ki 17:13-18 RSV}

What a picture this is of the evil results of sin in the human life particularly as it affects the out-

ward bodily life. Have you ever noticed this? We speak of the marks of sin upon some individual and it is amazing how early those marks begin to appear when there is a dissolute, debauched way of life. I am not talking about the normal marks of old age. These come to all of us – even the righteous. You know the five B’s of middle age – baldness, bifocals, bridges, bay window, and bunions. These are just the normal marks of decay. I am talking about the marks of coarseness and vulgarity that mark the body of man when it is expended in high living, a dissolute life, overindulgence in food and drink, and all the other things that leave a mark upon the body. The body is first to go just as Israel was the first to go here.

Judah was next. Judah was arrested from decay for awhile by the glorious life of Hezekiah who arose in the midst of darkness. His father had been an ungodly king and his son following him on the throne was an ungodly king. But Hezekiah was marked by the grace of God. The kingdom had fallen into such decay when he came to the throne that his first act was to cleanse the temple. It took the Levites – the priestly tribe – sixteen days to carry all the rubbish and junk out of the temple before they could even begin to purify it for the services again. That is how corrupt the nation had become. Hezekiah also reintroduced the Passover. He also destroyed the great brazen serpent that the people had been worshipping. This was the very serpent that God had used for their blessing when Moses lifted it up in the wilderness (Num 21:8-9). But Hezekiah in fine sarcasm called it a piece of brass and destroyed it because it had become an object of idolatry. Many things that were once used in blessing become idols if we hang on to them because of the sentimental value.

Hezekiah’s life was miraculously extended when the shadow on the sundial turned back ten degrees and he was allowed fifteen more years of life. In those fifteen years, however, he had a son named Manasseh who became the worst king Judah ever had. Manasseh had the longest reign of any of the kings – fifty-five years of ungodliness. Thus some have said that Hezekiah is the man who lived too long. If he had accepted the word of the Lord to him about his death, Israel would have been spared the terrible deeds under Manasseh.

So the kingdom declined, and finally, Judah was carried away by Nebuchadnezzar into Babylon the symbol of corruption and defilement. For a few

years the temple remained in Jerusalem, but in the end it too was stripped and burned. The walls of the city were broken down, and all the people were carried away into captivity. The book closes with Zedekiah, the last king of Israel. After he was captured by the King of Babylon, his sons were slain before his eyes, and his eyes were put out. Then he was bound and taken to Babylon.

Zedekiah was the last king that Israel ever had. Later, in the tumult and the tremendous confusion in Jerusalem during the Passover week when our Lord was crucified, Pilate offered their king to the nation, “Here is your King!” {John 19:14b RSV}. But the crowd meant it when they cried out, “We have no king but Caesar,” (John 19:15b RSV). Yet it was Caesar’s governor who taught Israel its lesson by having this inscription written above the cross “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19:19b RSV). That poor people will never know another moment of genuine prosperity and blessing either spiritually or physically until they shall see “him whom they have pierced” {Zech 12:10b RSV}, and recognize the king that was sent to them in lowliness as Zechariah prophesied.

Now do you see what this book is about? It is a picture of a wasted life.

Here is a picture of an individual who is a Christian, whose foundation is laid by Jesus Christ, but who has built upon it with only wood, hay and stubble. In the secret place of his heart, in the will, he has refused to walk in obedience to the things revealed unto him through the Holy Spirit who dwells in the temple of his human spirit. As a result his life becomes more and more characterized by decay and corruption and defilement. It begins with the body and then becomes evident in the personality. Cruelty, hardness, and defiance set in, and, finally, the temple itself is burned. Paul tells us in First Corinthians that for each one there is the judgment of fire which will reveal our work; “the wood, hay, [and] stubble” {1 Cor 3:12 RSV} will be burned although the believer himself will be saved, “but only as through fire,” (1 Cor 3:15 RSV).

The whole lesson of Second Kings, of course, is that it need not be so. God is continually interrupting our lives with the evidence of his grace. God tries to arrest us in our stubborn deliberate ways. Yet we can go ahead. God will not stop us – just as he didn’t stop them. We can go on beating our way to the top of the heap, and, perhaps,

win the acclaim and approval of the world around us. But one day we shall have to stand naked before the one who loves us who gave himself for us and to whom we have denied the right to be God in the temple of our spirit. We have robbed him of his inheritance in the saints. In that day, John says, we shall be ashamed before him at his coming {cf, 1 Jn 2:28}. May God grant that the lesson of these books may come home to our hearts.

Prayer:

Our Father, we know that this is not recorded merely for our enjoyment, or for our astonishment, but, rather, for our instruction. All these things were written that we may see ourselves, and, seeing ourselves, make that adjustment by the Holy Spirit within, who causes our kingdom to flourish in abundance, in victory, in prosperity, in joy, in peace and blessing. In Christ's name, Amen.

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