

2ND KINGS

Week 17, chapter 13

It's time to step back again and get the bigger picture of what is happening in the Book of 2nd Kings. We need to do that because in the next few chapters some seismic shifts in Israel's political, social and religious fabric will occur and so we need to establish the context on both heavenly and earthly levels. What is being narrated for us is the spiritual and physical self-inflicted death spiral of Israel and Judah. And since Israel and Judah have become entirely separate kingdoms, with only common family ties to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that have kept them from seeing one another as full-on enemies, then we have been getting little capsules of stories about what was going on in each kingdom. First the Scriptures will select stories about kings and prophets and happenings in the northern kingdom of Israel, and then it will switch to stories about kings and prophets and happenings in the southern kingdom of Judah, and then back again. It is an attempt by the author of this book to synchronize the declines of the two kingdoms, and to show both the contrasts and the similarities between the two kingdoms who are both inhabited by Hebrews, although each kingdom consisted of different Hebrew tribes. Chapter 12, for instance, dealt with Judah. Now as we get ready to study chapter 13, we rotate back to the north, to Israel.

Even the terminology used can get confusing as we cycle back and forth between the 2 kingdoms. During this era the terms Israel and Israelite had to be taken in context, because they meant different things to different people under different circumstances. The northern kingdom was indeed called Israel, but it also went by the name Ephraim (after the most dominate northern tribe). The people who lived there were called either by their tribal name or by their kingdom name, Israel-ites. But for them, the term Israelites could also go beyond their own kingdom name and in some contexts indicate their membership in Jacob's extended family, the combined 12 tribes of Israel. Thus at times Israelite was a national term, and at other times it was a familial term.

The southern kingdom was called Judah and Judah was both the name of the tribe who dominated the region and it was the official national name of the kingdom. Like in the north, the people who lived in the south identified themselves according to the name of their tribe (Judah primarily but also Simeon), and also by the name of their kingdom (Judah), and at times by the familial name Israelites since they too were ancestors of Jacob called Israel. From a national perspective, a citizen would call themselves a Judahite. From a familial perspective they would call themselves an Israelite.

This may seem like overly complicated nuances that cause ones eyelids to droop and have little bearing on what a modern Christian needs to know in order to study the Bible; but if End Times prophecies are important to you (and they ought to be), then one had better understand these nuances as most of the End Times prophecies actually were written during the time of Kings and then shortly thereafter, and so these End Times terms are couched in the terminology and context of this Biblical period. Some of the fanciful interpretations and dubious doctrines about End Times events that we have read and heard from novelists and pastors over the last several decades indicate that they have little or no knowledge of these nuances and so tend to head off on rabbit trails that certainly make for spell binding novels and compelling sermons, but have little basis in fact and amount to little more than personal speculation that comes from a vivid imagination.

What 2nd Kings shows us is that while Judah and Israel were on the same downward spiritual trajectory, their rates of descent were slightly different and this was because Yehoveh's authorized Temple and Priesthood were located in Jerusalem of Judah and so there was a natural resistance in the southern kingdom to the virus-like infection of idolatry and alternative worship practices that mostly came from the north. The northern kingdom went so far as to set up their own alternative and competitive worship centers and priesthoods. Even so, both kingdoms had long periods of abject perversion and wickedness interrupted by occasional sincere revivals. It seems that just as God was ready to exercise His judgment and exile one or the other kingdom into the hands of a foreign oppressor, a Hebrew prophet or a king would rise up and lead their people back from the brink.....at least temporarily.

What we've also seen is that in many ways the troubling results of wickedness that revolved around idolatry, unfaithfulness and the accompanying immorality actually started much earlier with King Solomon, when he allowed his hundreds of foreign wives to worship their foreign gods in Jerusalem. Some of these pagan religious practices involved worshipping in temples of the false gods, religious sex acts, drinking blood, and there is even strong evidence of a limited practice of child sacrifice. King Solomon did more than merely look the other way; the Holy Scriptures clearly state that he actually participated in some of the festivals and temple activities of these foreign gods, apparently to please one wife or another, and to appease the various special interests groups of Israelites that devoted themselves to one particular god or another.

Nonetheless King Solomon and his father David were the glue that held Israel together during those 80 years that Israel operated as a unified and sovereign nation, a Kingdom of God, even though Judah and those tribes to the north of them, and also those tribes who lived on the east side of the Jordan River, weren't particularly keen on having a central government over them, no matter where it was located. And part of the reason is that no matter who was king, he would by definition have to belong either to one of the northern tribes, or to one of the southern tribes. And the nature of tribal relationships being what they are, there was no way that such a king would be even-handed; he would always favor his own tribe and that tribe's coalition partners. And the Bible narratives about each king point out that reality and the dissention that

it caused.

Thus upon Solomon's death there was a power vacuum for leadership over all Israel, and the result was that the nation of Israel dissolved back into its more natural, long standing tribal coalitions of Judah and Simeon in the south, 7 ½ tribes as dominated by Ephraim in the north, and 2 ½ tribes in the Trans-Jordan. The loyalties of the tribe of Benjamin, which lay on the geographical boundary between the northern and southern tribes, tended to bounce back and forth between the northern and southern kingdoms. In general the 2 ½ tribes that resided to the east of the Jordan River aligned with the northern tribes, but also weren't necessarily on bad terms with Judah.

When Jeroboam became the 1st king of the newly established northern kingdom after Solomon's death and the subsequent civil war, he also became de facto king over the 2 ½ tribes in the Trans-Jordan. The tribes there never banded together to establish their own separate Trans-Jordanian kingdom, and therefore never had their own king. Rather they chose to remain as somewhat autonomous and independent tribal districts and to ally and identify with the northern kingdom and to more or less accept that king as their king but not on a formal basis.

But because Judah was now a separate kingdom from Israel, and because Yehoveh's Temple and Priesthood were located in Judah, and thus the Levites and Priests were loyal to Judah's monarchy, Jeroboam decided to create his own alternative state religion in the north, using his own priests. Thus as the centerpiece of his religion he had two Golden Calves built that he declared were images of Israel's historical god, Yehoveh. But in the process of ignoring the Lord's commandment against making graven images of Him, the northern monarchy also created their own doctrines, customs and worship practices that by definition were at odds with the Torah-based doctrines and worship practices of the authorized Temple in Jerusalem. Since in that era a nation, its people and society, its king, and its gods were all tightly interwoven and inseparable, this drove a deeper and deeper wedge between Judah and Israel.

However we are just emerging at this point in 2nd Kings chapter 13 from an extended period of time that began with the King of Israel named **Achav** (Ahab), who made the shrewd political move of having family intermarriage with the monarchy of Judah. This served to make strong ties between the 2 kingdoms and made a way for **Achav** to secure a peaceful southern border, and to extend his reach and influence; but it also served to export to Judah the wickedness, immorality, and idolatry that was characteristic of the north.

If in our day a space alien arrived in New York City, and we wanted to explain to him America's current political, religious, economic and social realities, we could not do so by only focusing on New York and not even the 50 states. We would have to include especially the circumstances of the Middle East, China, Europe, and even Mexico because they all have had

enormous impact on why the United States is as it is today. The same goes for explaining how, by the time of the era of the Kings, David and Solomon's Israel had become divided into 2 kingdoms, and these 2 Kingdoms aren't very far away on a timeline from being exiled from their land in two distinct stages: first, the combined 10 tribes of the north and of the Trans-Jordan would leave in the 720's B.C., and later the tribes of the south, Judah and Simeon, would depart in the 590's B.C. But these two stages of exile didn't happen suddenly, out of the blue, nor were the national powers that conquered the two Israelite kingdoms unknown or heretofore inactive.

Thus for a few chapters, now, in 2nd Kings we've been reading about Haza'el King of Aram (Syria), who had been attacking Israel and wreaking havoc, but at the close of chapter 12, he decided to extend his range and reach beyond Israel and went for the heart of Judah. But what we haven't heard anything about, yet, is the catalyst that had much to do with why Syria was going after the Hebrew tribal territories. And that catalyst and unspoken player at this point was the biggest dog on the block in that era: Assyria.

Assyria had empire building in mind. Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, wanted to expand his kingdom to establish a greater Assyria and create the largest empire the world had known. He of course wanted tribute and wealth like all kingdoms did; but he also wanted more territory, which was somewhat unusual for the era. The Assyrians didn't have a lot of choices in the direction that they might be able to expand. Babylon was nearby and quite tempting, but they couldn't go that direction because it was too powerful to take on. Thus Assyria chose to look westward towards Lebanon and Syria, places that they considered easier candidates.

Haza'el was king of Syria at the time and naturally, he too wanted to conquer and extract tribute from the conquered. But because Babylon and Assyria were too big and powerful for him to send an army and try to take over towns and cities in that direction for the purpose of accumulating wealth, Haza'el decided to go towards Israel and the Mediterranean coastal lands. That is why we read of his several successful campaigns into Israel and into the territories of the Israelite tribes located east of the Jordan River. But then later we read about Haza'el's unlikely defeat at Israel's hand, and then things are quiet for awhile.

Haza'el's defeat was not entirely Israel's doing. Haza'el found himself having to devote many of his military resources to protecting his own kingdom from Assyria, who was once again on the march; and that reduced his ability to project power towards Israel. So when we see these times of peace in Israel, when Haza'el wasn't attacking them, there was a reason for it; he was under attack from this growing menace of Assyria. And eventually Assyria would become a powerful empire; it was they who God would use to empty the northern kingdom of Israel, as well as the Trans-Jordan Israelite tribal territories, of their people.

But despite all of these historical facts that are verified not just by the Bible but in thousands of

Assyrian, Aramean, and Babylonian records that have been unearthed, catalogued, and translated, these nations and kings with their grand aspirations were but pawns in the hands of Yehoveh. In some way that is impossible to even barely imagine, let alone duplicate, God uses the wills and desires and accomplishments of humans (whether for the good or the bad) to achieve the higher purpose of His will and plan. Of course, none of these nations or their kings had any idea of the true roles they were acting out in a cosmic play of redemption. It's only when looking back in hindsight that we see it, recognize the humanly impossible nature of it all to happen as it did, and appropriately fall down in awe at the feet of our God.

So as we continue in our study, and it seems as though we are merely reading dusty historical fact after historical fact, in reality we are learning about how it was that God orchestrated unwitting nations and their leaders to achieve His divine purposes. And the pattern of how He achieved His purposes in that time is generally the pattern of how He achieves His purposes now and shall in the future. So it is definitely worth our time and attention to find out.

Let's read 2nd Kings chapter 13.

READ 2ND KINGS CHAPTER 13 all

Here we are back to dealing with the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom. In an earlier chapter we found out that Jehu, a military commander who God anointed through one of His prophets to become king of Israel, had done precisely what God had set as preconditions for his becoming King, and we read of the Lord commending him for it. Those preconditions were that Jehu destroys to the last man the dynasty of King **Achav** of Israel, and that he rid Israel of Ba'al worship. However after he obediently accomplished these good things, instead of an appropriate response of leading his people back to the proper Torah-based worship of Yehoveh, **Yehu** reinstated the Golden Calf cult of Jeroboam. The consequences of this foolish and disobedient action were that the Lord opened the door for King Haza'el of Aram to once again harass and attack Israel. And interestingly, just as Jehu had been anointed by the Lord as the King of Israel to be used of God for good purposes, so had Haza'el been anointed by the Lord to be used as an implement of His divine judgment upon Israel due to their unfaithfulness.

Chapter 13 opens by giving us a marker in time. It was in the 23rd year of the reign of the child-king of Judah, Joash, that **Y'ho'achaz** (Jehu's son) became king over Israel. **Y'ho'achaz ruled** for 17 years and died. During his reign he followed in the footsteps of his father and also led Israel in Golden Calf worship. What we know from archaeological records is that he ruled from 814 – 798 B.C. All during his reign he warred with Syria.

Now, before we go on, let me point out that in verse 10 we're told that it was in the 37th year of Joash's reign over Judah that another and different Joash become king over Israel; this new Joash took over from his father, **Y'ho'achaz**. Simple addition says that if **Y'ho'achaz** ruled for 17 years, counting from the time of the 23rd year of King Joash of Judah's reign, that means he reigned until Joash's 40th year. But verse 10 explicitly says that it was in the 37th year of Joash that **Y'ho'achaz's** son started to reign.

Now, there is no way to determine with certainty whether we have a scribal error or not. Most modern scholars believe that the problem is not with error, but with the kind of Regnal dating system that was employed. If you'll recall a much earlier lesson we discussed that there were 5 different Regnal dating systems used in Scripture, and they varied not only according to the era, but to the kingdom. Some think that at this time Judah was using one system and Israel another. But there is also the greater likelihood that what is being described here is a co-regency, which is something we have seen a number of times starting back in the Book of 1st Kings. That is, a king's son will begin to rule alongside his father thus giving us a kind of junior and senior king ruling simultaneously: a co-regency. Depending on the reasons for it, the senior king could be ruling in name-only due to his incapacitation or senility and would continue to hold the title of king until he finally died. Or the junior king could have been coronated much earlier than actually needed, and thus didn't actually rule, but this premature coronation was arranged so that the current king could control with certainty who succeeded him.

King Y'ho'achaz was even worse than his father Jehu (we're not told exactly why the Lord saw him in an even more negative light), and so the Lord led Haza'el to become a relentless oppressor of Israel, even though Haza'el never seemed to connect Elisha's strange anointing of him as King of Aram with his never-ending desire to harass Israel. Finally, **Y'ho'achaz** sensed that Yehoveh was behind this constant war footing, repented, and pled to the Lord for help. The Lord **shema** (listened and acted) upon **Y'ho'achaz's** petition NOT because he had turned from his sins (which he hadn't) but because the Lord felt pity upon His people of the northern kingdom. And then vs. 5 says something that commentators, Hebrew and Christian, have debated about for centuries. It says, "So Adonai gave Israel a savior who freed them from the grip of Aram (Syria)". Scholars have ventured that this savior was an unnamed judge; or it might have been **Y'ho'achaz's** son Joash, and then grandson Jeroboam II; or perhaps it was some unnamed military leader. Further the assumption is that this savior HAD to be a Hebrew. While I understand all the guesswork, I don't think the solution is that mysterious if we but broaden our search.

Ancient Assyrian and Aramean records agree and make it clear that it was at this same time that Assyria's King Shalmaneser threw all his forces at Haza'el King of Syria, because Haza'el had become so focused on conquering Israel that it left Syria somewhat vulnerable. Haza'el therefore had no choice but to withdraw his army from Israel to defend his homeland against Assyria. There were a number of battles that went on for some years that kept Haza'el occupied and Israel unbothered. But there is another interesting piece of information in the Assyrian archives that adds light to the situation. It seems that before Jehu died he had worked

a deal with Shalmaneser, and agreed to a tributary alliance with Assyria (that is, Israel agreed to pay Assyria to be their friend). This alliance was maintained between Assyria and Israel even after **Y'ho'achaz** succeeded his father. There is little doubt to me that the unknown savior of verse 5 that caused Haza'el to withdraw from Israel and give Israel a needed respite from war, had to have been no other than Shalmaneser King of Assyria. So again, God's supernatural providence shows up and the humans who are bringing about His will are completely unaware of it.

Well, that was the good news. The bad news is that because **King Y'ho'achaz** didn't connect his plea to God for help with the help that he graciously received in the form of Shalmaneser attacking Israel's enemy, Syria, the king went right back to his idolatrous ways and led his people to resume their Golden Calf worship. It is informative for us to notice how even though Israel used Golden Calf images, they thought it OK because they assigned them to Yehoveh. But, as always happens, once a worshipper begins down that slippery slope of assigning pagan practices to the worship of God, then more practices will be added eventually and pretty soon proper worship becomes unrecognizable. In relatively little time the reasons for how these new practices ever became part of God-worship are forgotten, and why they're done is no longer questioned. So we read in vs. 6 that now the Israelites took another step and incorporated the religious use of the Asherah-tree in Samaria (Israel's capital city). Asherah is a form of the word Ashtoreth, and Ashtoreth is Ba'al's wife. The Asherah was a symbol of Ashtoreth. No doubt Israel convinced themselves that as long as they used this pagan tree that began as a symbol of Ashtoreth, but did it in the name of the God of Israel, that the Lord would find it acceptable and bless it. Wrong.

The consequence that the Lord laid upon Israel for their idolatry was that Haza'el, King of Aram, so decimated Israel's army that Israel was left with almost no means of self-defense. All that remained of the once proud and powerful army of Israel was 50 mounted cavalry, ten chariots, and 10,000 foot soldiers.

We see these examples again and again in the Bible about what happens when God's people decide that we can make up the rules of worship as we go. I'm continually amazed at Christians who think that because of Jesus's advent, we can do what these Israelites did, but God will justify it for us. The thought is that since Messiah came we have been given the authorization to assign holy uses for pagan symbols and pagan practices, effectively Christianizing them, and God will be pleased. So even though we find no other use for these symbols and practices in history except pagan, we can kind of remake them in our image; Church leaders can holy-fy the pagan, assign them pious sounding Christian names, and presto! We have a new and acceptable Christian symbol or observance!

What's kind of humorous is that I don't even have to suggest what those symbols and observances might be; you already have mentally pictured them. Some of you might be

cringing and thinking that perhaps you need to at least reconsider what you've been doing. Others have already dismissed such thought as legalism, or see me as an unnecessarily wet blanket thrown upon good Christian fun. The Church has historically adopted several of these pagan practices and observances, made them the new Christian orthodoxy, and then declared that any Believer who refuses to follow along is a heretic worthy only of scorn or excommunication. And by the way, you might be surprised to know that the Pilgrims came to America to escape persecution in Europe for refusing to obey those particular church edicts.

Verse 8 brings King **Y'ho'achaz's** reign to a close. Of course he was buried in Samaria, the civil and religious capital of his northern kingdom, as opposed to the City of David, the civil and religious capital of Judah.

So in verse 10 we are introduced to our 2nd Joash, who is the son of **Y'ho'achaz** and the new King of Israel. To be clear: for a couple of years there were TWO King Joash's ruling: one was the King of Israel, and the other was the King of Judah. Often, to help differentiate between them, we'll find in some Bibles one is named **Y'ho'ash**, and the other he is named **Yoash**. **Y'ho'ash** means "given by Yehoveh", and **Yoash** means "given by God" (**Yah**). Joash King of Israel was a wicked king, and he died after ruling for 16 years. In fact vs. 12 tells us that at one point he even made war against **Amatzyah** King of Judah. Joash of Israel died, and his son Jeroboam II began his rule.

But before Joash died something extraordinary happened. Suddenly, Israel's venerated prophet Elisha is brought back into the picture; he is near death. Although his sincerity can be reasonably doubted, we get a touching scene where Joash goes to Elisha's bedside to visit him and pay his respects, and he utters to him the very words that Elisha had shouted when he witnessed his mentor Elijah being taken up into the heavens in a whirlwind. "Father! Father! Israel's chariot and horsemen!" This was the king bestowing an incalculably great honor upon Elisha that essentially equated him with Israel's greatest prophet **Eliyahu**. But it also shows us that those words originally spoken by Elisha had literally become part of Israel's traditional vocabulary, so powerful was their image and recollection.

Elisha was so moved by the humble and submissive demeanor of King Joash, he wanted to give the King gracious assurance about what was coming. And what was coming was more war with Syria. Now many fine Rabbis and Sages say that **Yoash** used the occasion of Elisha's illness to bring a petition for rescue from Syria before him. And that the narrative proves that what we are witnessing is primarily a response from Elisha to the king's request. I tend to agree with them, although I can't say for sure.

Elisha tells the king to pick up a bow and some arrows. Then Elisha placed his own hands upon the king's hands. Next the window facing the east was to be opened and the arrows shot in that direction. East symbolized the direction of Aram (Syria). Elisha placed his hands upon

the king's to symbolize that the Lord's power would flow through this dying prophet into the King of Israel. The idea was to give Joash confidence that the Lord would be with him as he fought against this powerful Aramean army and that victory would belong to Israel. The prophecy was that the Syrian army would be decimated, and that the major battle would take place at Aphek.

Elisha told him to start shooting the arrows, but for some reason **Yoash** stopped after shooting only 3. This greatly angered Elisha as he wondered why the king didn't empty the quiver. He says that since Joash didn't do that, then the victory over Syria would be incomplete. What about this event and Joash only shooting 3 arrows, so greatly upset Elisha? It is obvious that Joash showed only a mechanical interest in what he was instructed to do, without it being accompanied by great zeal. But there is more. This is where God-patterns again come in to play.

Some years earlier Elisha had helped a widowed woman who was part of one of the prophet guilds Elisha oversaw to support herself by selling anointing oil. She was to go into a room with what little oil she had, borrow and beg for as many empty oil flasks as she could obtain, and keep filling those flasks until the oil stopped flowing. A very large number of flasks were filled until the miracle ended. But the idea was that it was not to be the woman who decided when she had been blessed enough. It was that God alone would determine how little or how much blessing she was to receive.

Joash, as a king used to doing things his way, decided that shooting 3 arrows was sufficient. The 3 arrows, however, represented only a fraction of the victories over Syria that the Lord had intended on supplying to Joash. What the king should have done is keep shooting the arrows until they ran out, each arrow representing the blessing of another victory. Perhaps, as with the oil, the arrows would have just kept coming even though the number would have far exceeded what the quiver could have possibly held.

Such is the nature of the Lord's blessing upon us. It is in His sovereign will to bless us a little or a lot, and the blessing will not have much to do with what seems rationally possible. But if we don't keep pulling back the string on our bow and shooting those arrows of deliverance and victory, we'll never know the limits of what God has intended for us. And what a sad epitaph for Joash that so much divine blessing went unused, due only to the greatness of his arrogance and the small measure of his faith.

We'll continue chapter 13 next time.