

2ND KINGS

Week 18, Chapters 13 and 14

In 2nd Kings 13, the subject is the northern kingdom of Israel and their accelerating decline towards God's judgment upon them. As the name of the Bible book implies, the story is told in the context of the succession of Kings of Israel who grew ever more wicked and idolatrous and thus drew their nation and their people further away from God. But for the most part, neither the leaders nor their people seemed to recognize their dangerous situation. Just as the popular American fable about the frog in the kettle seeks to illustrate, one can be immersed into what seems to be an inviting, benign, comfortable, and healthy environment; however if one doesn't stay alert, those seemingly comfortable and secure surroundings can turn out to be a deception and ultimately fatal. The slide from comfy to catastrophe doesn't happen in one immediately evident lurch or sudden calamitous event. Over time small changes occur; in the case of the unsuspecting frog, what began as an ideal water temperature rose so gradually that his body adapted to the warmer and warmer environment. He didn't sense the increasing heat and so the dangerous change went on generally unnoticed. However at some point, the heat became great enough to silently kill and so the frog succumbed, having been none the wiser and thinking everything was OK until he breathed his last.

It was like that in the northern kingdom of Israel, whereupon soon we will read of their exile; and there is a great lesson from this that we modern Believers need to ***shema*** (we need to hear and act upon). While books like Kings and Chronicles feels so much like primarily a long history lesson, in reality it is the Lord showing us what disaster awaits when leaders lead their people away from strict obedience to God's laws, commands, and principles and instead into manmade customs, philosophies and ways that are more pleasing to humans. So as a preface to today's lesson on 2nd Kings 13 and 14, and I want take us on a little detour.

Each new Israelite monarch added some misguided innovation or further deviation from God's laws and commandments, which usually built upon ones his predecessors had established for their own agendas and purposes. Jeroboam (the 1st King of Israel after the civil war that split David and Solomon's Kingdom into 2 pieces) decided to use the Hebrew religion as a political tool to gain control over his people. He naturally didn't want the citizens of his recently-formed kingdom journeying south to the rival Kingdom of Judah to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, fearing that their continuing loyalty to the Priesthood in Judah would diminish their loyalty to him. So he decided that the solution was to create two alternative worship centers in his own territory in Dan and in Bethel, and he equipped them each with a Golden Calf (to differentiate between the Jerusalem Temple and Jeroboam's Temples), which he assured His people was nothing but an image meant to honor the God of Israel, Yehoveh.

No doubt there were complaints at first from those who remembered the law against graven images in God's Torah; but in a few years as their passions subsided a bit, and with the citizenry more concerned about everyday matters and life in general, they convinced themselves that while worshipping an image wasn't necessarily right, it wasn't terrible; at least if it was an image of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But about 30 years later, the newest king of Israel, **Achav**, married a thoroughly pagan woman named Jezebel, and together they set out to convince the Golden Calf worshipping Israelites to worship Ba'al. At first, the demand was only that, out of tolerance for their foreign neighbors and for the Queen, proper respect be shown for Ba'al; a citizen was allowed to continue worshipping the Golden Calves if they chose. This proposition of respecting many gods while worshipping mainly one, met well with the oriental mind of that era. In time, however, the demands from Jezebel increased such that the northern Israelites were urged to abandon the Golden Calves and worship only Ba'al.

Many Israelites succumbed to peer pressure and acquiesced, but many more refused. Ironically, the dissenters thought of themselves as the more pious, and so rallied in support of continuing worship of the Golden Calves as they now considered this to be the normal and proper worship of Yehoveh. It only took a few years for the society of Israel to drop any thought of adhering to the Torah as its guide to righteousness, or of the Temple in Jerusalem as the only God-authorized place for sacrifice, and instead to replace it with manmade images and traditions that their religious authorities said was all about honoring the Lord God. But now that worshipping a golden image of a bull, and offering their sacrifices at the cult sites of Dan and Beit-El had become the accepted orthodoxy for the Hebrew religion in the north, it was much easier to move to the next stage, which was to add the worship of the image of another and different god.

Thus in but a mere 20 years after Ba'al worship had been ordered by Ahab and Jezebel, the Lord gave a military commander named Jehu the task of ridding Israel of this deplorable Ba'al worship altogether, and if he did that the Lord would ensconce him as the newest King of Israel. Jehu obeyed God, destroyed the Ba'al temples and idols, killed the Ba'al prophets and priests, and even disposed of the evil Queen Jezebel. But, instead of leading Israel back to the Torah-type of God worship, King Jehu merely reinstated the Jeroboam-type of Golden Calf worship and of course the pious of Israel hailed him for it since to their minds, he was essentially reinstating Yehoveh worship. One must understand: Jehu no doubt THOUGHT he was doing good. He most certainly believed he was doing something of which God would approve and commend him. He would have been shocked to read the Holy Scriptures that we've been reading about those times and about him, and to see the negative light in which he is cast and the condemnation he has received.

Fellow Believers, as hard as it is for us to hear, Christianity has followed a similar path and for the most part the Body of Christ is completely unaware of it. We are today far, far away in

many cases from what the Bible teaches as proper worship of God, even though what we tend to do seems to us like the right and proper things to do. In fact, to do otherwise would seem to be like no worship at all, perhaps even heresy. But that is because we grew up with these practices and observances; they are usual and customary in our society; they've become part of us, familiar, and so we don't question these things. Rather we staunchly insist upon and defend our typical Christian practices and customs, as we know them, and to the death. We prefer Social sermons that long ago replaced actual Bible teaching because it seems normal to us. Allegorical biblical interpretations that can twist and turn the words of the Scriptures into any kind of meaning we desire has replaced literal, straightforward biblical meaning, and we like it because it makes God seem so much more appealing and Christianity so flexible if not evolutionary.

Within 2 centuries of Yeshua's death, gentiles who had little knowledge of, and no allegiance to, God's Torah became the new leaders of the body of Christ and all authority was removed from the Jewish leadership of The Way who had held it up until that point. All that was available to these new gentile leaders as Scripture, however, was the Old Testament because there was no such thing as the New Testament, yet. But because they had little or no understanding of the Hebrew culture, and because they were Greek speaking Romans who inherently saw the Jews as something foreign to them, they were uncomfortable with the Hebrew Bible as it was, and also tended to misunderstand some critical passages due to lack of context.

Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in 70 A.D., and by 138 A.D. Jews were forbidden to live there, so the center of Christianity that early on was overseen by James, the brother of Jesus, moved from Jerusalem into the gentile Roman Empire, and soon became centered in Rome itself. There, the Roman Church was born and a New Testament was created and canonized that focused on the life and works of Messiah Yeshua and incorporated the words and acts of some of His Apostles, primarily according to the teachings of Paul.

Then, another step was taken: the New Testament was given preeminence over the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament quickly became viewed as a document by and for gentiles, while the Old Testament was framed as a document by and for Jews. Since that time the value of the Torah and the Old Testament has been diminished by Christian leadership.

But what would the Roman Church use to form its rules and doctrines if the Old Testament was no longer seen as relevant? Yeshua wasn't big on giving new commandments, nor did He deal with Church organization since the movement that was spawned by Him didn't begin in earnest until after His death. Paul was the answer, because as a trained Rabbi, he spoke in terms of do's and don'ts and addressed several organizational issues. Paul's influence was so great that Bible scholars dating back to the Middle Ages at times referred to the Church as the Pauline Church (meaning the Church as defined by Paul). And it has remained so to this day, for the most part.

By the mid-20th century the Old Testament was finally deemed to have such little value and relevance for Christians that some Bible versions were printed that consisted of only the New Testament, and typically were handed out to new Believers as their first Bibles. Of course this not-so-subtle message that the OT was not only irrelevant but perhaps even a detriment to a modern Believer left it's mark on the millions of new Believers who saw the Bible as only the New Testament (the now deleted OT was just an unneeded relic).

The next stage was that the "seeker" oriented Pastors beginning with the Jesus movement found it more expedient to teach primarily the 4 Gospels, since what followed was mainly a lot of rules and regulations laid down by Paul. Some of these rules and regulations were becoming politically incorrect in the Western world. So with a newly refined doctrinal view that freedom in Christ meant no obligations to God and no rules to follow, then Paul's writings became less relevant, less desirable, and more of a burden. Thus a rather mainstream (although certainly not universal) Church viewpoint that has emerged is that Christians have but one rule to follow, a rather general one, called the Law of Love.

Then, from that the next step is where we are in 2012; it has been to put Bibles away entirely as not much more than a beloved symbol of our Christianity. Like wearing a Cross around our necks, or putting a fish decal on our bumper, Bibles are often carried as a kind of identification with our faith; but they are used sparingly. Instead, we now read books ABOUT the Bible, and books about faith, and about heaven, and about social justice.....but the Bible itself is read almost not at all.

Thus today (as we Christian frogs sit nearing the boiling point but are blissfully unaware or unconcerned of our condition) a new phenomenon has risen up: what I call the Gandhi form of Christianity. That is, Gandhi once said: ***"Jesus occupies in my heart, the place of one of the greatest teachers who have had a considerable influence on my life."***

It is no longer the Biblical Christian faith but rather the philosophy of Jesus the Good Teacher that is being taught in our most liberal churches, but it is also becoming popular and gaining traction elsewhere. That is, the Bible (Old and New Testaments) is thought to be too old, too unreliable, too controversial, too hard to understand and too attuned to an ancient and extinct Hebrew culture to be taken seriously, let alone be applicable to a modern enlightened Western world. Thus we are reduced to a philosophical approach: What Would Jesus Do? And what He would do, say these modern adherents to this Gandhi Christianity, is expressed in a Gandhi-like message of passivism, love and tolerance.

It took a very long time to get here, didn't it? And yet, in some ways, not so long. It happened in a steady decline from the moment that Roman Christianity took one fatal misstep: it severed away its Hebrew faith roots, its Hebrew heritage, and its Hebrew leadership, which together

would have formed the context of our faith. But without that context it has become a religion of, by, and for gentiles. And each generation has played its part in leading us to our current condition. It will arrive, soon I think, in a similar place of exile as did the northern kingdom. And it is summed up well by Jesus' comment that:

CJB Matthew 7:21-23

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants.

22 On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'

23 Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'

As Solomon said in his famous proverb: there is nothing new under the Sun. So let's continue our 2nd Kings 13 study, now that we have some more context for understanding the importance of what we are reading and just how much we need to take it to heart.

RE-READ 2ND KINGS 13: 20 – end

We left off in our previous lesson with the reappearance of Elisha, and he is ill and dying. King Joash of Israel had come to pay his respects and to ask for Elisha to petition God to help Joash defeat the armies of Syria (Aram). Elisha did so, and in so doing asked Joash to shoot arrows out of the east facing window of his room, to indicate that the target was Syria. Elisha laid his own hands upon Joash's to symbolize that the Lord would be the instrument of Israel's military victory over Syria.

However after taking only 3 arrows from the full quiver and shooting them, Joash stopped, leaving several unused, thinking it sufficient. This angered Elisha because it showed how little faith he had in God supplying nearly unlimited victory. Thus Joash would have victory in 3 battles with Haza'el King of Aram, but ultimately Israel's army would suffer great losses.

In verse 20 the great prophet Elisha dies. He was probably about 80 years old, having served in his capacity as prophet for the past 50 years. As typical, they placed him in a burial cave. It seems, however, that at this time the Moabites would cross into Israelite territory to raid Israel's food supply. It was at the beginning of the year, probably meaning soon after Rosh Hashanah. It seems that some Israelites were in the process of holding a funeral when they

spotted these marauding Moabites off in the distance, and in a panic threw the body into the burial cave where Elisha's corpse had been placed.

Just like in our day when saying that we bury someone upon their death, it is a general term meaning most any kind of interment from a coffin placed under the earth, to cremation and the ashes placed in an urn, to the body being put into a crypt, so it was in this era with the Hebrews. The Hebrew word used here is ***gabar*** and it means to bury, but not necessarily in the sense of digging a hole in the ground and putting a corpse in it. It just means a proper treatment of the dead. In fact, at this time (around 800 B.C.) the Hebrews usually wrapped the deceased in white linen and placed them in a burial cave. So that's what happened with Elisha, and that was the process of what was happening with the dead person who got unceremoniously thrown into Elisha's cave by his family as they hurried to leave the area to avoid the Moabite raiding party.

But when they did, something frighteningly strange happened; when the corpse touched Elisha's bones, it sprang back into life! Truth be known, the meaning of this event is not agreed upon by Hebrew or Christian scholars. Some say that it was an attestation to the Lord's power over life and death, and others say it was to show that the deathbed prophecy of Elisha concerning Israel's victory over Syria lived on.

Some Rabbis say that Elijah had promised Elisha a double portion of holiness, and that mere contact with Elisha's bones was sufficient to restore life to this dead person proved that Elisha had received that promised portion.

A Jewish scholar says that this was similar to the miracle that happened after Moses died. The manna, which fell on the refugees of the exodus, was done according to Moses' great merit; and his merit was so great that the life-sustaining manna continued falling even after his death. So, I'll let you decide which of these (if any) seem to be correct.

The final verses show us that Elisha's prophecy about Syria was fulfilled. Verse 22 explains that all during the days of Joash's father, ***Y'ho'achaz***, the armies of Aram oppressed Israel. But God had pity on the people of Israel and did not allow Haza'el to consummate his victories, nor was the Lord yet ready to see His people exiled from the land. We are told specifically that it was because of the Lord's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He allowed Israel to remain. Let's be clear that what this is referring to is the Covenant given back in Genesis 15 that guaranteed that Abraham's descendants would be given a land inheritance for their own, and that the land would be Canaan. So while there were other aspects of the Abrahamic covenant about how he would be blessed with countless descendants, and that through him all the families of the world would be blessed, and a few other promises, the centerpiece of the covenant was always about the land. Isaac didn't get a new covenant, he inherited Abraham's. And Jacob didn't get a new covenant; he inherited the

Abrahamic Covenant that had been passed down to his father Isaac.

The final words of verse 23 translate as “up to now”. That is, the Lord had not cast the people of the northern kingdom away from His presence up this point. But this is telling, because it infers that at some point He will throw them out of the land and turn His back on them.

In time Haza’el died; and now that both **Y’ho’achaz** and Haza’el were dead, the promised deliverance could occur. Thus Joash was able to retake from Ben-Hadad (Haza’el’s son) some cities in the Trans-Jordan that his father **Y’ho’achaz** had lost some years earlier to Haza’el. In full confirmation of God’s promise to Joash, since Joash had shot only 3 arrows, the Lord only gave him 3 victories. It was in these 3 victories that he recovered some of the Israelite cities that had been lost. But, had Joash been more faithful and kept shooting those arrows when he was with Elisha, there is no telling how many cities and how much territory he might have won back. Joash’s epitaph is the story of lost opportunities and squandered blessing.

Let’s move on to chapter 14.

READ 2ND KINGS CHAPTER 14 all

After spending chapter 13 that deals with kings of the northern kingdom, in chapter 14 we once again switch back to Judah and their kings. Thus the typical method is employed to synchronize this new king of Judah’s reign to his counterpart in the north, the king of Israel. **Amatzyah**, the son of Joash (the Joash who was the King of Judah) began his time on the throne when Joash (the King of Israel) was in his 2nd year of ruling Israel.

So, chronologically speaking, most of the information that we read about in chapter 13 (including Elisha’s death and burial) took place while **Amatzyah** was sitting on the throne of Judah. Thus we have to intertwine chapter 14 with chapter 13 to get the overall picture.

Recall that King Joash of Judah had been assassinated after a 40 year reign that on balance was a reasonably righteous reign. His son, **Amatzyah**, was a near carbon-copy of his father in both his vices and his virtues. One non-similarity was that while his father became king when he was only a 7 year old child, **Amatzyah** was fully an adult of 25 years of age, and so was equipped right away to rule fairly effectively.

To give us kind of a gauge of where the new king fit on God’s scale of merit and

righteousness, **Amatzyah** is compared to David; and he doesn't measure up. While David was fiercely loyal to Yehoveh and wholehearted, **Amatzyah** took after his father Joash who seemingly had no strong inner convictions, but rather ruled pragmatically based on what seemed best to him at the time. The Rabbis say that whatever part of the Torah that this father and son did observe, it was done mechanically and out of habit, and lacked sincerity.

Verse 4 brings up again this sticky matter of high places, **bamot**, that obviously bothers God. In this context these high places were essentially unauthorized private family altars, even though they were altars to Yehoveh (these were not altars to pagan deities). I say unauthorized in the sense that the Lord had authorized only one place of sacrifice for His people and that was at the Temple in Jerusalem. But had this issue of **bamot** arisen in the north in Israel, where the law of land outlawed the people from going to Jerusalem for Temple sacrifice, then it might have been understandable that those who wished to worship YHWH as closely and purely as was possible had little choice but to use their own private altars (instead of going to the Golden Calf cult cities), or not sacrificed at all (which would have been unthinkable since there would have been no means to atone for sins).

The problem is that these particular high places were in Judah where the people were able to easily access the true Temple of God. So their choice to use **bamot** to sacrifice was nothing short of arrogance and stubborn pride directed against the Lord.

Verse 6 explains that only after he had consolidated his power could **Amatzyah** act against those conspirators that had murdered his father. The reason that this took some time is likely because after the rebellion against his father that ended in his assassination, it took some time to put down those rebels who didn't necessarily want Joash's son to assume the throne. And there must have been enough dissent that **Amatzyah** had to not only quell the rebellion but also to demonstrate that he would be a worthy king.

Once he did that he rounded up and executed his father's killers. But the point is made that he did NOT kill their children (meaning male children). That is unlike what was customary in the Middle East, and it probably was quite a welcome surprise to the common people of Israel. This passage goes so far as to explain that he did NOT kill the offspring of the murderers because he was following the Law of Moses, and then goes on to more or less quote the passage. This is referring to Deuteronomy 24:16.

^{CJB} **Deuteronomy 24:16** *"Fathers are not to be executed for the children, nor are children to be executed for the fathers; every person will be executed for his own sin."*

So here we see that **Amatzyah** indeed had knowledge of the Torah and had a righteous side to him.

Verse 7 begins quite a famous and important story about **Amatzyah** conquering the Kingdom of Edom. We're going to stop here for today, because we need to read 2nd Chronicles 25 that is a parallel account of this foray into Edom, and it also supplies some other helpful information about **Amatzyah's** reign that isn't present in 2nd Kings 14.

We'll start out next week, then, in 2nd Chronicles.