

MALICIOUS MONARCHS, FAITHLESS FOLLOWERS, PREACHING PROPHETS— AND TWO KINGDOMS IN A REAL MESS

Presented by

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Every person listening to me present this sermon today realizes—after having heard the title of my sermon—what this lesson is going to be about. How can I be so sure of that? I know it because in our young people’s “Journey through the Old Testament” class on Sunday mornings, as well as in the adults’ “All about the Bible” class on Sunday afternoons, we have just begun studying what happened to the kingdom of Israel after the death of King Solomon. Let me refresh your memory.

Shortly after ascending the throne of Israel, Solomon married the daughter of the pharaoh of Egypt (1 Kings 3:1). Not long after that, God appeared to Solomon with a warning, in which the Lord told the king, “If you will walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded you, and if you will keep My statutes and My judgments, then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever” (1 Kings 9:4-5). But Solomon failed to heed God’s advice. Instead, as 1 Kings 11:3-8 goes on to tell us, “Solomon took seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. And when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God.... So Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord” (1 Kings 11:3-8).

God therefore said to the king, “Because you have done this, and have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom away from you” (1 Kings 11:11). As a result of Solomon’s apostasy, upon his death his kingdom was torn in two. His son Rehoboam was anointed king over the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, while Jeroboam, one of Solomon’s servants, was anointed king over the remainder of the tribes. During Solomon’s forty-year-long reign, the magnificent temple that he had built was one of the wonders of the ancient world, and there was not another kingdom on Earth that could match the glory, power, or influence of the Israelite nation. As the Bible tells us in 1 Kings 10:23-24, “King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom, and all the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom.”

But all of that was about to change—**immediately and radically!** As the text of 1 Kings 12:28-30 makes clear, Jeroboam’s crown had barely settled on his head before he hastily ordered the erection of two idols fashioned in the shape of golden calves—with one of them being placed in the city of Dan in the north of Israel, and the other being situated at Bethel, outside of Jerusalem. Jeroboam then told his people, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel!’ ” Later—to make matters even worse—some of the kings who came after Jeroboam went so far as to introduce Baal worship in Israel.

Meanwhile, things in the Southern Kingdom of Judah were going no better under Rehoboam’s leadership. As 1 Kings 14:22-24 explains,

“Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord, and provoked Him to jealousy with the sins that they committed, more than all that their fathers had done. They, too, built for themselves high places, sacred pillars, and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree. And there were also perverted people in the land. The people of Judah did according to all the abominations of the nations that the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel.”

As a result of the many sins of Judah and her monarch, in the fifth year of Rehoboam’s reign, God allowed Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt to attack Jerusalem, at which time he plundered the city and stripped Solomon’s stunning temple of many of its treasures. The text of 1 Kings 14:26 states matter of factly that “Pharaoh Shishak took away the treasures of the house of the Lord and the treasures of the king’s house.” From this point forward, the Northern and Southern Kingdoms ran headlong down a path that ultimately led to the complete destruction of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians, and to seventy brutal years of captivity for Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. During the roughly 200-year existence of the Northern Kingdom, 19 kings ruled over her. And the Bible has scarcely a good word to say about a single one of them. During the approximate 400-year-long existence of the Southern Kingdom, 20 kings or queens ruled over her. And of those 20, only 8 can be referred to as being “good” in any sense of that word. As the years passed, both kingdoms were filled with malicious monarchs and faithless followers—to whom God had sent preaching prophets. In short, both kingdoms were a real mess!

But in this sermon, it is one of those “preaching prophets” I want to bring to your attention. He was the first named prophet sent with a message from God to a ruler in either the Northern or Southern Kingdom. By the time this particular prophet finally made his presence known, the Northern Kingdom had been in existence for approximately 70 years, and was enduring the evil reign of its seventh king. In fact, this king was **so wicked** that 1 Kings 16:31-33 actually says of him,

“As though it was a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam...he went and served Baal and worshiped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. He made a wooden image, and **did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.**”

The preaching prophet’s name was **Elijah**. And the malicious monarch to whom he unexpectedly appeared was **King Ahab**, who happened to be married to one of the wickedest women ever mentioned in the Bible—**Jezebel**. Because of the lessons we have recently studied in our Bible classes, you know what happened. Elijah was instructed by God to go to Ahab with the following message: “There shall not be dew or rain these years, except at my word” (1 Kings 15). The Old Testament does not tell us what Elijah meant by his phrase, “these years.” But the New Testament does. In James 5:17 we read, “Elijah...prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land **for three years and six months.**” During those three-and-a-half years, Israel suffered terribly. The people’s crops withered. Their flocks and herds perished. And the Israelites themselves died—all because faithless people were content to follow a malicious monarch in rebellion against their God. At the end of the drought, Elijah met Ahab and Jezebel’s 450 false prophets of Baal for a contest on Mount Carmel—and not only defeated them, but also slew

every one of them. Some time later—after Ahab and Jezebel had murdered an innocent man by the name of Naboth so they could steal his vineyard—the “preaching prophet” Elijah made his final appearance before the king and queen to present his prophecy about their impending doom. Elijah told them, “Because you have sold yourselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord I will bring calamity on you:

- “In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick your blood, Ahab.
- “I will take away your posterity, and will cut off from Ahab every male in Israel, both bond and free.
- “The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel, and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as trash on the surface of the field, so that they shall **not** be able to say, ‘Here lies Jezebel’ ” (1 Kings 21:19-24; 2 Kings 9:37).

Eventually, every aspect of Elijah’s prophecy came true just as he had spoken it. First, some time later, Ahab was killed in a battle with the Syrians. According to 1 Kings 22:38, Ahab’s blood was washed out of his chariot, and “the dogs licked up his blood while the harlots bathed, according to the word of the Lord which He had spoken.” Second, as 2 Kings 10:1-10 explains, when Jehu became king of Israel, he killed every single one of Ahab’s male relatives, in fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy that God would “cut off from Ahab every male in Israel.” Third, as 2 Kings 9:30-37 informs us, Jehu also ordered Jezebel to be put to death. And, just as Elijah had prophesied, the dogs ate her flesh and carried away most of her body so that there was not even enough of her left to bury.

Throughout the remainder of the future stormy history of both Israel and Judah, God continued to send His “preaching prophets” to the kings and queens of those kingdoms. While a tiny handful of the rulers of Judah temporarily listened to those prophets, none of the rulers of Israel did. Prophets like Obadiah, Elisha, Nehemiah, Ezra, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, and many others **begged** God’s people to be faithful to Him. In the end, however, those prophets’ plaintive pleas fell on deaf ears.

And that brings us back to King Solomon. Earlier in this sermon I quoted God’s admonition to Solomon to remain faithful to Him, and the blessings that God would give the king if he obeyed the words of the Lord. But the passage from 1 Kings 9 that I mentioned to you was not **all** that God had to say. Here are the rest of God’s words on that occasion, as found in 1 Kings 9:6-9.

“If you or your sons at all turn from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them; and this house that I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight. Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And as for this house, which is exalted, everyone who passes by it will be astonished and will hiss, and say, ‘Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?’ Then they will answer, ‘Because the people of Israel forsook the Lord their God, who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore the Lord has brought all this calamity on them.’ ”

God kept His word. As a result of the sinfulness that became so widespread among the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in 722 B.C. God allowed the wicked Assyrian nation to triumph in battle over

them and carry them away into captivity. The Israelites were never heard from again. Then, as a result of the sinfulness that became so prevalent among the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, in 586 B.C. God allowed the powerful Babylonian nation to triumph in battle over them and carry them away into captivity. Seventy years later—as a direct result of a prophecy issued earlier by “the weeping prophet” Jeremiah stating that a remnant of Judah’s people would return to Jerusalem, and that through them the Messianic line would be protected—a small number did return in order to refurbish the city, rebuild its walls, and erect a small temple at which the people could worship. But the once-great, previously powerful Israelite nation that had reached such incredible heights of glory under David and Solomon was no more. It had become, just as God had predicted, “a byword among all peoples.” Even today—thousands of years later—when someone mentions the word “Jew,” most people do not have a very positive first impression, do they?

Now, if you happen to be wondering to yourself, “Why in the world did all of this happen?,” I will leave you with the same answer that God gave Solomon: “Because the people of Israel forsook the Lord their God, and embraced other gods, and worshiped them and served them; therefore, the Lord has brought all this calamity on them.” Enough said.

However, before I finish this sermon, I would like to ask you an important question. What is the lesson in all of this **for those of us today who are Christians**? Jesus answered that question when, in speaking of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to Solomon, He told the people of His day, “The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed **a greater than Solomon is here**” (Matthew 12:42). It is Jesus, of course, who is “greater than Solomon.” In fact, on one occasion during Christ’s earthly ministry the Jews asked Him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said simply, “**I am!**” (Mark 14:61-62). On another occasion when Jesus was being questioned by the Jews, they asked Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you, but you do not believe.... The Father and I are one” (John 10:24-25,30).

God told Solomon, “If you will...do according to all that I have commanded you, and if you will keep My statutes and My judgments, I will establish the throne of your kingdom forever.” Jesus—as the Son of God Who is one with the Father—has told us, “If you love Me, **keep My commandments**” (John 14:15). Solomon disobeyed God—and look at the horrific, long-lasting consequences that resulted from his sin. If we disobey our Lord, the consequences of our sin will be no less terrible. In the end, as Jesus Himself put it, we will lose our souls and “go away into ever lasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46). One of those “preaching prophets” of the Old Testament—Ezekiel—once asked the people to whom he was sent, “How should we then live?” (Ezekiel 33:10). Just asking that question should be enough to provide us with the correct answer, don’t you think?