

Oh, to be King

Today we'll look at the books of 1 and 2 Kings. These books cover the history of the last King of the united kingdom of Israel, Solomon, and then the successors in both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, also called Judah, until the time of the exile of Judah to Babylon.

The Northern Kingdom, which kept the name "Israel" lasted for just over 200 years after the death of Solomon in 930 B.C. In 722 they were invaded and crushed by the Assyrians and the people were resettled in various parts of the Assyrian Empire, mostly in Mesopotamia, which is modern-day Iraq, in the region of the Euphrates River.

During those 208 years there were 19 kings in Israel, and they all shared one thing in common, besides the throne. Every one of them did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh. It started with Jeroboam, who became the first king of Israel following their breakaway from Judah and from the line of King David. His legacy act, the thing he did that most influenced the future of the nation, was to build two golden calves, one in the far north of Israel at Dan and one at the southern end of their territory, at Bethel. And he said this:

It is too much trouble for you to worship in Jerusalem. O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of Egypt! (1 Kings 12:28)

Jeroboam built a whole religion around these two golden calves, including ordaining priests to offer sacrifices, not from the tribe of Levi, but from whoever wanted the job. He also instituted the mid-autumn religious festival in Bethel where he offered the sacrifices to the calves he had made. As if that wasn't enough, he built shrines for worship of the pagan gods, Ba'al and Asherah. He was a complete sell-out of the faith of his forefathers; a successful politician, but also an ungodly leader. And Yahweh, the God of Israel, was so angry with Jeroboam that He made this promise:

Since you have turned your back on Me, I will bring disaster on your dynasty and kill all your sons, slave or free alike. I will burn up your royal dynasty as one burns up trash until it is all gone. (14:9b,10)

The prophet Ahijah, through whom this word was given, told Jeroboam's wife that the LORD would uproot the people of Israel and scatter them beyond the Euphrates River because they had become worshipers of Asherah poles. And he closed with these words:

He will abandon Israel because Jeroboam sinned and made all of Israel sin along with him. (14:16)

Nearly 200 years later, when Israel was being defeated and deported by the Assyrians, the Israelites were still worshipping at Dan and Bethel, still rejecting Yahweh as their God, still rebelling against the house of David ... in fact, you can go to Dan today and see the site where the worship of the golden calf took place. The gold is gone.

These two sites became the Achilles heel of Israel, their vulnerable place, the place where they became enslaved to idols by their own king. "O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of Egypt."

Jeroboam's son, Nadab, succeeded him as king, continued in the worship of idols and was assassinated by a man of Issachar named Baasha. Baasha destroyed the entire family of Jeroboam, as Ahijah had prophesied, then reigned over Israel as king for 24 years. But, even though he thought he should assassinate the king and take his place, he didn't do anything different, especially in terms of worship -- he continued the pattern set out by Jeroboam, leading the people in the worship of idols. Elah son of Baasha succeeded him, was assassinated, also in the second year of his reign and Zimri, the man who assassinated him, reigned seven days before he was attacked by the man the army had chosen to rule.

This man's name was Omri and when he attacked Zimri, Zimri burned the king's palace down on himself ... after a very short time as the king of Israel. But at least he had seven days -- listen to this story:

Now the people of Israel were divided into two groups. Half the people tried to make Tibni son of Ginath their king, while the other half supported Omri. But Omri's supporters defeated the supporters of Tibni son of Ginath. So Tibni was killed and Omri became the next king. (1 Kings 16:21,22)

We don't even know if poor Tibni wanted to be king, just that some people were trying to make him king. For that, he lost his life. And, for that matter, we don't know if Omri wanted to be the king -- we just know that the army chose him to be the next king and marched with him back to the capital.

The two notable things about the reign of Omri is that he bought a hill from a man named Shemer and built a city on it that he called Samaria and that became the capital, replacing Shechem. The other notable thing he did was to be the father of the man who would become the worst of all the kings of Israel, Ahab.

As you read through the remaining chapters of 1 Kings and up to chapter 17 of 2 Kings where Samaria falls and Israel is taken into captivity, you might wonder why anybody would want to be king. Especially you might wonder why anybody would want to be king when their only spiritual allies are a couple of gold calves that have been fashioned by one of the kings who ruled before they did. Of the 19 kings of the northern kingdom, I counted 7 who were assassinated, 1 suicide, 1 killed in battle and 1 who died from injuries he sustained in a fall. That leaves slightly less than half who died from natural causes. And three kings lost their entire families within a generation or two of their reign.

Why would someone want to rule God's people without God's approval? Why would someone want to be king of Israel and not be submitted to the LORD of the nation? The story of the kings of Israel is the story of one ruthless idolater after another, a

series of 19 men who couldn't bring themselves to break down the golden calves of Dan and Bethel and return Israel to the worship of the God who had delivered them from Egypt. Those calves meant that they had separated themselves from Judah and no king was willing to even talk about reuniting with Judah and worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem. Why would they? Reuniting would mean submitting to a king from the line of David. Reuniting would mean that these kings would no longer have power over the people -- they would become subjects of the king in Jerusalem. What means more to a king than power? When one man has that kind of power he finds it almost impossible to give up.

And so the golden idols in Dan and Bethel remained. The kings came and went, sometimes in rapid succession. The people talked about Yahweh as if they knew Him, but He was only a vague memory. By the end they had not known Him for many generations and were so spiritually blind that they didn't realize that they had left Him.

The kings of Judah present a different story altogether. Judah's main city was Jerusalem, where the temple of Yahweh was. The presence of the temple and the regular sacrifices and festivals of the faith reminded the people of who their God was and what He had done for them. The kings who followed the example of the northern tribes and encouraged Baal worship or some other forms of pagan worship, would usually allow the pagan shrines to remain standing and not discourage the people from going there to worship. Even some of the good kings, men like Joash and Amaziah who did what pleased the LORD for the most part, failed to tear down the pagan shrines.

The worst of the kings used the temple for false worship. Manasseh showed no restraint in his worship of idols, building altars to them in the temple courts and erecting an Asherah pole there as well. He did much to defile the worship of Yahweh in Judah and, more than any other person, he was responsible for the exile of the Jews in Babylon -- (2 Kings 21:11-13; 24:3,4)

The best of the kings cleansed the land of shrines for idol-worship. Asa did part of the job, getting rid of idols and burning an Asherah pole, but he didn't completely destroy all the pagan shrines. The two who were most zealous for the worship of Yahweh were Hezekiah and Josiah, later kings of Judah, who tore down the high places which had been set up for the worship of Baal.

I'll read you the introductory synopsis of the life of Hezekiah as it appears at the beginning of 2 Kings 18:

Hezekiah son of Ahaz began to rule over Judah in the third year of King Hoshea's reign in Israel. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah.

This is the formula throughout the books of Kings -- at what age the king came to power, how long he ruled, who his mother was, and the next part, where his life was summarized in one phrase:

He did what was pleasing in Yahweh's sight, just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the pagan shrines, smashed the sacred pillars, and knocked down the Asherah poles. He broke up the bronze serpent that Moses had made, because the people of Israel had begun to worship it by burning incense to it . . . Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was never another king like him in the land of Judah, either before or after his time. He remained faithful to Yahweh in everything and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses. So the LORD was with him, and Hezekiah was successful in everything he did. (2 Kings 18:1-7)

Now, that's a nice legacy; that's the way you want to summarize your life's work -- you were successful in everything you did. But the condition for that success is maybe not so desirable, or more people would do it, more of the kings of Judah would have done it. Hezekiah remained faithful to Yahweh in everything and he carefully obeyed all the commands the LORD had given Moses. The result was success -- in battle, in material prosperity, in protection from Judah's enemies and in his health.

The books of Kings are, primarily, about the kings of Israel and Judah. There are some stories about the prophets Elijah and Elishah, but most of the space is given to the accounts of what the kings did with the opportunity that they had to rule a people. As I read these stories again, I am struck by the simplest of questions: "Why would anyone want this job?"

We all want to be in control, at least, at bare minimum, to be in control of our own lives. We feel safer, more secure, when we know pretty much what to expect out of the next day, the next month or year. We like the idea of making plans and being able to carry them out. We like to be the kings of our own little environment, no matter how small and insignificant it may be in this wide world of ours. The appeal of being the king is that you can tell everyone else what to do and you don't have to take orders from anyone. The ruler makes the rules. The ruler has everyone else acting for his or her benefit. The ruler doesn't have to bow down to any other power or give in to the petty wishes of the people around.

Being the king is being at the top of the pyramid of power and having everyone else looking up to you. It's more than being a president or prime minister where you have to look to your party for support and where you have to deal with the checks and balances of a particular form of government. This is raw power, as long as you're able to keep some strongmen on your side. This is the kind of control over one's own life that we all, secretly maybe, wish we had.

But there is a less honorable aspect of being king, and that is the desire to control other people's lives. Solomon's son Rehoboam illustrates this desire rather well. When his father passed away and Rehoboam was waiting to be crowned king, the leaders of the people spoke to him and asked for a break:

Your father was a hard master. Lighten the harsh labor demand and heavy taxes that your father imposed on us. Then we will be your loyal subjects.

(1 Kings 12:4)

Rehoboam could have done that and his older and wiser counsellors advised him to listen to the people's request and do as they asked. But his young friends, his buddies that he'd grown up with, advised him to say things like, "My father used whips on you, but I'll use scorpions!" Why he needed to play the tough guy, to show everyone who was in charge, I don't know, but that was the speech he made, and 10 of Israel's 12 tribes listened to that speech and came away saying, "Let's go home, Israel! Look out for your own house, O David!" And suddenly, Rehoboam was the king of Judah and the Levites instead of the king of all Israel.

Now, you're probably thinking that you're not ever likely to be a king, so what's the point of this message? If you continue to live in Canada, it's very unlikely that you will be a king, but there is a point to looking at the kings of Israel and Judah. The point is that wherever we rule, wherever we have authority, wherever we speak into people's lives, we can do it our way, or we can do it God's way.

I think that every one of those 39 men who became king of their nation, north or south, thought that it would work out well for them. They thought they could do what they wanted to do and that they could gain what they wanted to gain because of their position. Very few of these men thought that it was worth their while to seek for the things that would honour God. Very few of them thought it was a good idea to seek the LORD in every important issue of state, even though David had done that and it had worked out well for him. Very few of them were evangelists for the worship of Yahweh, trying to inspire the people to come to Jerusalem, to stir up a revival of their faith. And, as I mentioned earlier, only two of them took down the pagan shrines that were all over the countryside and where the people who had once belonged to God now worshiped statues made of wood or metal.

So, this is the application for today. We all have a sphere of influence. Our influence is not as great or far-reaching as that of these kings of old, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that God has entrusted something to us and we have to decide, most likely on a daily basis, whether we are going to exercise our authority, or our influence, in a way that honours Him, or in a way that honours us. We have to decide whether we're going to seek the things that God has chosen for us, or if we're going to choose the direction and then ask God to bless it. We have to choose whether we will trust ourselves, our intuition, our intelligence, or whether we'll put our trust in God.

How does that work? What are we really talking about here? There is a key to success in life, and that key is to walk humbly with God. We daily acknowledge that He knows what's right, what's best for us, that He can see the future and know how a particular course of action is going to turn out. The key, then, is to ask God what His plan is, wait to hear, and then to follow His leading. Isn't that the way to describe what King David did every time the Philistines were attacking the armies of Israel? He went to God, asked what he should do in the situation, then he did what God told him to do -- and he was always met with success. Every time he followed that formula, seeking

and obeying, he was successful.

But almost none of the kings who came after him either followed that formula or found that level of success. Why not and what can we learn from them?

1. They didn't see the need. They thought they had got to this position on the basis of merit or through their own smarts or just, they were born to it. But they didn't see God's hand at work in calling them to lead. Even Israel's first king, Jeroboam, who was told that God was snatching ten tribes away from Solomon's heirs and giving them to Jeroboam to rule -- even he went on to rule according to his own ideas ... like having golden calves in Dan and Bethel.

2. They didn't want to be obligated to Yahweh. That's the thing about being king -- you're not really obligated to any-one except your closest friends who surround you and help you stay in power. Why would someone with that kind of power want to be accountable to God?

3. They didn't believe that following God would make things better for them and they didn't care that following God would make things better for the nation.

So the applications for us are pretty obvious.

1. Do we see the need for God's leading in our lives? Or do we conclude that we just have to find our own way in life? Or do we not think about it and just do what we think we should do?

2. Is there any part of us that resists being obligated to the Lord, that doesn't want to follow Jesus, that resists the call to obedience, to discipleship? Do we want accountability?

3. Are we people of faith? Do we actually believe that God's ways are higher and better and wiser than ours? Are we willing to test it out and see if God will lead us well?