

Notes on II Kings 13–25

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Chapter 13

The story returns to the North where apostasy continued but where the prophet Elisha's word still held sway. Jehu had brought Ahab's dynasty to an end but had not brought the nation back to God. His sons now reigned, one after another for four generations as the prophet had said, however they continued their false worship. Jehoahaz was given up to the Arameans and became almost helpless, therefore he cried out to God and received mercy. (His deliverer was actually an Assyrian who attacked Aram and kept them away from Israel.)

Jehoash remained apostate but inherited the protection God had given to his father. He appears to have been grateful to Elisha, even if not to the Lord, for the protection he lived under, because he lamented the dying of Elisha. The vibrant Elisha, still strong in faith as he lay dying, gave Jehoash opportunity to show some spirit in trusting God to keep the Arameans at bay. 'Shoot an arrow to the East!' 'Hit the ground with the arrows!' The king could only muster enthusiasm to do it three times. Elisha was angered by his tardiness and told him he would not have enough victories to remove the threat of Aram.

Elisha had not lost his love for God and his grace by living in this apostate land. He still believed in the mercy of God for the nation and did his best to stir the king to a living faith. Even in death, his bones revived a dead soldier in the middle of a battle. God was always remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Martin Luther had a like spirit in the 16th century.

'And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us;
We will not fear for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.'

'Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also:
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is for ever.'

Prayer

We thank you, our Father, for your eternal covenant of blessing made with Abraham, and for the mercy promised to David, a promise that we would have a Saviour, and for the forgiveness and renewal that have now been sealed with the blood of your Son. Surely, you are our God and we are your people. May your good purpose and grace always reign in our hearts, and may this generation know there is a living God in the land. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 14

Amaziah came to the throne in Jerusalem. He had dissident elements to subdue before the country was securely in his control (like Solomon in I Kings 2:46). Then he was able to deal with those who had murdered his father, but with the reserve required by the Mosaic Law. He maintained true worship in Jerusalem but fell short of the love David had for God. He should have sought to be like David rather than like his immediate father whose heart had strayed. He regained control over Edom with a clear victory, but then became stubbornly proud, and suffered a humiliating defeat that his people had to share. Fifteen years later, he was assassinated as his father had been. (Perhaps Amaziah's enemies had waited until there was a son old enough to place on the throne.)

II Chron. 25:14–15, 20 tells us Amaziah took some captured Edomite gods into the temple at Jerusalem, that he was warned about this by a prophet, and that his failure to listen led to his fall.

Power in the North changed to the third generation of the Jehu dynasty, Jeroboam II. His leadership was no more godly than any of his predecessors, but now, God had mercy on his people who had suffered for a long time. Assyria attacked Aram and weakened Israel's Northern enemy; then Assyria herself was preoccupied further North. All this happened according to the word of the Lord by Jonah. Jeroboam was free to strengthen his Northern border and extend it. He gained again what David had won (I Kings 8:65) and what God had said would be their Northern boundary (Num. 13:21). God, out of his own purpose and mercy, enabled the ungodly Jeroboam to bring relief to his people. However, God also sent Amos to warn Israel against wrongful use of their new prosperity, and their oppression of the poor. He warned that state security was a false trust and that their religion was empty.

See Amos 2:6–8; 5:21–24; 6:1–8; 8:4–6

Hazael, Jehu and Elisha were to kill many but leave 7000 true worshippers (I Kings 19:16–18). These three powers were now spent, but we must presume that God knew who were his own true people among these Northern tribes.

Prayer

Father, your work is never furthered by our pride, and you know how to abase those whose hearts are lifted up or are turned aside to idols. Keep us as servants of your mercy and ready for every good work. If you grant us days of plenty, may they be days of repentance rather than presumption. Surely, your reign of grace is on our land, through Jesus Christ. May he alone be exalted. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 15

Azariah (or Uzziah) had a long reign and maintained true worship in Jerusalem. The history of *Chronicles* tells us that he became widely known as a strong military figure, became proud and was struck with leprosy by God while arrogantly offering incense in the temple (II Chron. 26:16–21). His son took over all royal duties.

Azariah's actual reign may have been less than 52 years because he was a co-regent with his father, and then, later, was assisted by his son.

Meanwhile, in the North, Jehu's dynasty came to its appointed end. The country then had to endure the uncertainty of brief reigns, conspiracies and violence. The only settled reign of ten years came at the price of impoverishment of its wealthy citizens. The word of the Lord through Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea had sustained his faithful people and maintained a witness to God's purpose for the whole nation. Through them, the Lord, had offered repentance and hope to Israel, but the nation, as a whole, preferred its idols and was given over to the various ambitions and fortunes of its leaders.

Then, in the South, we are told that Jotham maintained true worship as his father had done. Furthermore God now allowed Aram to renew its strength and to attack Judah. This would set the scene for some famous encounters of the next king with the prophet Isaiah.

Neither the kings from the South or from the North have given us confidence that a son of David would bring righteousness and blessing to the nations. Yet such was still promised, and the faithful still longed for the outworking of God's promise. See Psalm 89.

Prayer

Father, we are often dismayed at the performance of our leaders, both in this world and in your church. Yet, you have taught us that your kingdom is not established in the politics of this world but by the reign of your Son, Jesus, as Prince and Saviour. Even now he reigns in grace and leads us in triumph. Grant that we may always hear the word of your prophets, and that we may discern between what we see and the constant forward movement of your kingdom. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 16

Ahaz was the most idolatrous king of Judah since Athaliah was killed 100 years before. He restored the dark days when Judah followed Northern idolatry rather than the Lord. Other kings had failed to remove high places, but Ahaz worshipped at them. He sacrificed his own son to the idol Molech, which throughout Israel's history, was a sign of the utmost degradation (Deut. 18:9–10; Ps. 106:35–40; Jer. 7:31; Ezek. 20:30–31).

Elam was active again and joined with the Northern tribes to trouble Judah. Ahaz bought relief from them by paying a heavy tribute to Assyria. The Chronicler regards this as a serious unfaithfulness (II Chron. 28:19–20). Isaiah was sent to show him that he could trust the Lord (Isa. 7), but all to no avail. Ahaz was besotted with idols and their lavish paraphernalia, and insisted on having a copy of Aram's altar made for

the Jerusalem temple. This is where Israel's worship now focused, except that he kept the Lord's bronze altar for consulting the Lord. He thought he could keep God 'on hold' awaiting his own pleasure. The Chronicler tells us that he also sacrificed to Aram's gods and finally closed the doors of the temple (II Chron. 28:23–24). Donald J. Wiseman suggests: 'All this may well represent the insinuation of a practice of trying to be "all things to all people" and deities'. Ahaz had to remove bronze from the temple to help with tribute and made other changes because of his vassal status under Assyria. It was a sorry time for Judah.

Either Edom or Aram (Syria) chased 'Jews' or inhabitants of Judah from the town of Elath. This is the first use of the term "Jew".

Prayer

Father, strengthen our hearts in the grace that you have bestowed on us in Jesus Christ. Modern 'idols' present themselves in fine dress. Their ways are convenient to the flesh. They seem to present easier and more immediate ways of gaining our ends. Father, forgive us for ever thinking that they could be better than you. May we always hear the voice of your prophets who warn us, and especially the voice of your Son who ever comes to renew us in grace. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 17

Hoshea was not as perverse as other Northern kings but the nation was settled in its evil. They were judged with vassal status, siege, and then captivity. Both officially and in private, Israel had indulged the worship of the nations around them. They refused to be the unique people that their God could make them by his covenant and ordered worship. It was God who had given the North to Jeroboam, however it was Jeroboam who had tried to establish himself by altars, priests and ceremonies of his own making (I Kings 12:26–33). Once that principle was established, there was no idolatry which the nation would not indulge.

God had endured the North with patience, and sent them his messengers, to no avail. The Southern tribe of Judah had been profoundly affected by this apostasy, but, for the sake of God's promise to David, they were left alone by Assyria.

Strangely, the immigrants from Assyria sent to inhabit Israel could not prosper without some semblance of the worship God had ordained for this land, even though they were not his people. The returning priests had one last chance to teach a true faith to a new people. This also failed, and the worship of God was corrupted and mixed beyond recognition among all the other idolatries.

Prayer

Lord, you have established your covenant forever through the blood of your Son, and have granted to us the forgiveness of sins. God forbid that we should now glory in anything save his cross. Speak to us, and keep us from every desire to establish ourselves in this present evil world. Through all the years, you have maintained a faithful people who love your name. Grant that we may be numbered among them, for the sake of Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter 18

Hezekiah was an outstanding king. He destroyed the false worship that Israel had fostered and trusted himself and his nation to the Lord. Like Joseph, Samuel and David before him, the Lord was with him and he prospered. But Assyria was now strong and had captured the Northern tribes. Hezekiah defied him for a while, but when his Judean towns began to fall, he removed the gold he had used to adorn the temple to negotiate a settlement. But his attempt could not satisfy the Assyrian king.

An Assyrian army returned, and its commander taunted Hezekiah with trusting Egypt, or even worse, with trusting in the Lord. He thought that when Hezekiah removed the numerous worship places of false worship around Judah that he was dismantling their religion. He knew they needed Egyptian cavalry to complete their fortifications. They could not even find their own horsemen for a battle. Had not the Northern tribes fallen to him? What could Judah's gods do? He claimed that their own God, the LORD, had commanded him to destroy their city and then to take them to his land. If they would give him their allegiance, he would provide for them. He was like Satan who promised Jesus the kingdoms of this world if he would bow down and worship him.

All this became public knowledge and the whole city knew their dilemma. Wisely, Hezekiah had said to his ambassadors that they should give no answer. This was a problem for God.

Prayer

Father, the great men of this world think that everything must fall before them. They do not understand our confidence and joy in you and in your Son. They cannot believe that you are faithful to your people when all earthly means of support are gone. Powers of darkness would make sport of us if we could not cry to you. But you are the Father who raised up from the dead our Lord Jesus. In his name, we trust our cause to you. Forgive our sins. Show us what we must do, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 19

Hezekiah went straight to the temple and humbled himself before God. He also needed the fellowship of the prophet Isaiah in this crisis. The surrounding cities had been defeated. How could Jerusalem stand? Money had not kept Assyria away. The city could not long endure a siege. But Assyria had claimed its gods were superior to the Lord, he on whom Hezekiah had set his trust. Would the Lord let this go unchallenged? Hezekiah thought not and believed Isaiah would think the same.

Without delay, the word of the Lord assured Hezekiah that Assyria would retreat and that their king would be killed in his own land. The Assyrian commander returned to find his king diverted by another war and left behind him a further taunt against God. The Assyrians were too full of their own successes to know the power of the living God. Hezekiah humbled himself again and took the letter to the Lord. What was at issue was the arrogance of those who had reviled the living God, and even more so, the purpose of God to make himself known to all nations. Surely God would deal with this threat for the sake of his own name.

Again, Isaiah sent a message to Hezekiah from the Lord. Concerning Israel he said, 'You are like a virgin daughter confident in the house of her father, tossing her head at danger.' To the King of Assyria he said, 'You think you have done great things, not realising that it was I who gave it to you to do them. I will lead you away like a captive with a hook in your nose.' He also gave Jerusalem an immediate sign of his favour: they would have food for the present, and be able to farm very soon. Then, they would grow strong and spread to re-inhabit the cities that had been destroyed.

All this was said to assure Hezekiah and Jerusalem that they should not fear the enemy at their gate. Jerusalem would remain, for God and for David. In the morning, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers, (or 185 of their commanders), were dead. Without further word, the army left, and their king died as God has predicted.

Prayer

Surely Father, there are no grounds for arrogance, either among the nations or among your own people. We cannot save ourselves and all our good has come from you. But it has pleased you to exult your Son Jesus by raising him from the dead. It pleases you to have mercy on all who believe in his name. For your own name's sake, preserve us, for we have no trust save you. Grant that we may grow strong and spread to left and right that the earth may be full of those who love you. Hear our prayer through Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter 20

Hezekiah had yet another crisis to face: his own death at 40 years of age. This would have appeared as a sign of God's disfavour. His son may not yet have been born, and he would certainly not have been ready to take over the throne. Would God thus deal with a faithful King? His prayer was heard before Isaiah had left the palace precincts. He would recover and should make use of a local remedy. The Lord was the God of David still.

Hezekiah was still sick, and the city was still under siege, so he looked for reassurance, and God granted his request for an immediate sign.

The manner in which a sun dial shadow could reverse is impossible to know. The significant thing is that whatever happened it was received by Hezekiah as simple assurance of his recovery.

Hezekiah's recovery, Jerusalem's repelling of Assyria and the sign on the sundial became well known. Israel's king received gifts from foreign courts, including Babylon. This story is interpreted when it is retold in II Chronicles 32:22–31. God 'left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.' Pride was there, and his pride was the occasion for God to show that those to whom he showed his treasures would become their captors. Again, he humbled himself and Israel's tragedy was deferred.

Isaiah's long prophetic ministry had continued right up to the reign of Hezekiah. Many encouragements and many promises of a coming Messiah had been given to him. These prophecies, together with deliverance from Assyria, the King's recovery from illness and the change of shadow on the sundial, had given him abundant witness to God's faithfulness to Israel and the world.

It seems, however, that, as faithful as Hezekiah was in his own stewardship, the largeness of vision brought by Isaiah had not taken hold of him. He did not greatly regret what would happen to his sons. He did not seem to understand the depth of sinfulness to which his own people would sink, or the awfulness of the captivity which would come. Especially, he did not seem to relish the vision, given to Isaiah, concerning the latter times when those in darkness would see a great light, and a child would be born who would usher in everlasting righteousness (Isa. 9:1–2, 7). Did he realise that a son of his, another David, would so reign that the whole earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord? In this coming King's reign, the Northern tribes would be regathered (from Assyria) and the South would be regathered from Babylon (Isa. 11).

Prayer

Father, we long for peace and security in our times. To this end we pray, and give thanks for the blessings that we have. Yet your purpose is broad. Your compassion has already embraced the nations. Your Son has borne the sins of the world. He has commanded us to make your grace known everywhere. Forgive the lethargy of our hearts. Let us not rest until all nations know that you are King. Keep us vibrant in hope that, by your gospel, the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord. This we ask in the great name of your Son Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 21

Manasseh's long reign took Judah down the same track as the Northern tribes in the days of Ahab. The nation became more idolatrous than the nations they had displaced (I Kings 21:26). He effectively dislodged the Lord as the centre of the nation's worship and taught his people that to receive help from these foreign gods they would have to participate in their gross cult practices. Having gone the way of Samaria and Ahab, he would share their fate.

Jeremiah (e.g. Jer. 19:3–4) and others were prophesying at this time, but to no political advantage. As frequently noted by the prophets, the denying of true worship led to hard times for the innocent (cf. Exod. 23:7; Deut. 19:10). In the reign of Manasseh, the penalty for not abolishing false worship came upon the whole nation (Ps. 106:34–40).

Little detail of Manasseh's many years is given, other than his catalogue of evils. His son was allowed to reign for two years and was then killed by his own servants (as his predecessors Joash and Amaziah had been). In the North, this would have signalled a change of dynasty, but not in the South. The people secured a Davidic ancestor on the throne. The promise of God to be fulfilled by a successor of David was strong, though its earthly sign was as slender as a thread.

Prayer

Father, without the coming of your Son, there would never have been true righteousness or holiness, and no escape from your rightful judgements. We are slow to remove idols from our land and so we become too much like the world from which you have saved us. How great is the work of Christ to cleanse the land, to purify a people who are zealous for good works! Keep us ever grateful to him, confident that what he has begun he will bring to its end. In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter 22

Josiah was young when crowned and was a contemporary of Jeremiah. His heart was stirred, and, in the height of his reign, he sought to repair the temple damaged by years of abuse and neglect. (The account has similarities to when Joash was stirred to repair the temple at the end of Athaliah's evil reign; see II Kings 11:12–15.) This clean up located a copy of Israel's covenant with God (probably *Deuteronomy*) which recounted the duties of Israel's worship and the curses which would come if they were not performed. Josiah was dismayed (tearing of garments was a sign of deep sorrow or remorse). What did all these renovations mean if the Lord was not pleased with the nation. Wrath was already on the land and he sought from a prophetess what he should do.

The sins of our parents are ours as well if we do not flee from them. But what seems to be uppermost in Josiah's mind is not who sinned but that he stood in continuity with all the Lord's people and that God's purpose was being worked out over the generations. All he could do was stand where he stood and do what was true.

He had already done what was proper, that is, he had been penitent and humble, and this is how he would remain. The judgement would still come because of the shame brought on God's name by the sins in the days of his father Manasseh (a culmination of years of apostasy), but this judgement would not arrive in his days.

Prayer

Lord, what can we say to you. Your name has been defiled by the idols indulged for generations, and by the arrogance that has abused the helpless for whom you cared. The repair of our church structures cannot suffice for true worship because you require truth in our secret heart. What then can we do?

'In the path of your judgments, O LORD, we wait for you; your name and your renown are the soul's desire' (Isa. 26:8). May we glory only in you and in your Son and in him crucified for our sins. Teach us to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before our God, and to wait for your mercy, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapter 23

Josiah vowed his own allegiance to the Lord's covenant and secured the compliance of the people. The covenant was read and the Passover celebrated. Then, he set about to purge the land of its evils. False priests were deposed, and in some cases, killed. False objects of worship were put beyond use ever again by burning and grinding, and altars were defiled with the remains of the dead. We are surprised to discover that part of what Josiah cleaned up was what Solomon had installed over 300 years before. Israel's kingdom had been marked by almost continuous idolatry.

The clean up of Jerusalem and Judaea, and then of Samaria and its towns, could hardly have been more comprehensive than it was. No king before him had kept such a Passover, nor any king before or after him turned to the Lord with such zeal. Yet God would still visit Judah with judgement. No purging by Josiah would wholly cleanse his people, nor any vows made wholly fulfill the covenant. That would await a greater King who, by his cross would destroy not only the idols, but Satan who reigned by them. In his day, the just requirement of the law would be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit (Rom. 8:3).

Josiah was killed in a needless engagement. His son Jehoahaz, with seemingly little trouble, allowed idolatry to flourish again. In three months, he was deposed and taken captive by Necho of Egypt. His brother was installed as king and renamed Jehoiakim. Judah was now a vassal state and greatly impoverished, but still, unrepentant.

Prayer

Lord, this history of our fathers forbids that we should boast. We, like them, left to ourselves, gather idols and will not fulfil your covenant. But you have not given us Moses as covenant head, for, under him, we would do no better. We look to Jesus, for, in him, you have cleansed us once for all. What terrors he endured on our behalf! In him, you have made a full end of all our sin. And now, your Spirit has come to fill the waste places and make them Holy by your presence. Father, keep our hearts for yourself, lest a fate worse than Israel's befalls us. This is our solemn prayer, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapters 24–25

Judah was helpless now. Jehoiakim changed his allegiance from Egypt to Babylon, then rebelled against this, but was preyed on by other old enemies. The Lord had come to take Judah from his sight because of all the evil done in Manasseh's day.

Jehoiakim died and authority passed to his son, Jehoiachin. In three months, he showed he was no more godly than his fathers. Babylon, who had now replaced Egypt as the local power, besieged Jerusalem, took Jehoiachin captive (see Jer. 22:24–27), and with him, gold that had been in the temple since the days of Solomon. All those with leadership or craftsmanship or military capability were also removed to discourage further insurrections.

The King's uncle, Zedekiah, was made puppet king, but with enough power to show that he had no intention of serving the Lord, and with enough folly to rebel against his overlord. God was showing, through giving them such a king, that he would cast Israel out of his sight.

So, Jerusalem was brought to its end. After ten years of pretence at being a kingdom, Jerusalem was surrounded. Zedekiah's attempt at escape yielded a bitter result. The king was led off blinded, bereft of his sons, and remained in chains until his death. The temple was demolished and its grandeur carted away to enrich Babylon, and the walls of Jerusalem were razed to the ground. Only some of the poorest of the land were left. Some remaining scattered forces came to Gedaliah and he urged them that to comply with Babylon was in their best interests. They had other ideas, assassinated him and led the remaining people into Egypt. Jeremiah tells us that they took him, protesting, with them (Jer. 43:1–7). Perhaps by way of contrast, we are told that the one king who gave himself up to Babylon was the one king who survived in Babylon and spent the last of his days at peace.

All through this time, Jeremiah was prophesying, saying that Jerusalem should humbly give way to God's judgement. The inevitability of this had been foretold in Josiah's day (23:27). It had always been a threat for an unfaithful nation (Deut. 28:36;

Lev. 26:33). The book of *Jeremiah* concludes with the story of Zedekiah's capture, and the comparison with Jehoiachin who yielded. Following *Jeremiah* is *Lamentations*, in which Jeremiah pours out his and God's sorrow over Jerusalem. 'Is there any sorrow like Jerusalem's?' he asks (1:12). He had had to witness the devastation and brutality and cannibalism and rape, and knew there was no hope for them in God, not yet. False prophets had deceived the nation (2:14). The sins of their ancestors could not be forgiven (5:7). But he knew that God would still be gracious to his people (3:21–36) and pleaded with God for this to come (5:19–22).

Jesus, like Jeremiah, wept over Jerusalem which had rejected him. As he went to his death, he looked beyond his own sorrows to those which would come on Jerusalem. 'Weep not for me but for yourselves.' In effect, he said, 'I will burn like green wood. You will burn like dry'. When his disciples saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies, that would be the sign for them to flee for their lives (Luke 21:21–24; 23:28–31).

Prayer

Father, together with your Son, we weep for the sorrows which must come when your covenant is broken and your Messiah is ignored. Many have no understanding of you who suffer with them, or of the hope you offer to them. They faint with fear for what is coming on the world and will not lift their eyes to you from whom would come their redemption. Yet we know you, our Father. We know your Son who, already, has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Have mercy on us. May the good news of your grace be always on our lips, even while we must witness the sufferings of this present time. This we ask through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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