

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Kings 12-16

"Given Up?"

The state of Israel became dismal after the death of king Solomon. His kingdom quickly divided into the 10-tribe northern kingdom, which kept the name Israel, and the small two-tribe southern kingdom that took the name Judah. Israel under the leadership of Jeroboam and his successors, drifted further and further into idolatry. Judah remained relatively more faithful to God, and kept a single dynasty – the house of David – for generations. Civil war and border disputes between the two kingdoms continued on and off for over 60 years.

1) *Many Kings*

In Israel, king Jeroboam was succeeded by his son Nadab, who reigned only two years. "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, walking in the ways of his father and in his sin, which he caused Israel to commit." Nadab was assassinated by Baasha, who promptly slew every member of the house of Jeroboam that he could find. There would be no dynasties in the northern kingdom.

Baasha was followed by his son Elah, who lasted only two years before he was killed while he was drunk by Zimri, his chariot-master. In a few days, Zimri slew every member and friend of the family of Baasha. When the people of Israel heard this, they rose up in revolt; they declared as king Omri, the commander of the army, and marched on Zimri's palace. Realizing that the city was

taken, Zimri shut himself into his palace and burned it and himself to the ground. He had been king for one week!

Meanwhile down in Judah, Rehoboam son of Solomon reigned 17 years, in which he vacillated between devotion to the LORD and allowing "high places" to be erected for foreign gods. He lost much of the gold and silver from the Temple when Jerusalem was besieged by the army of Egypt, but then humbled himself and repented of the idolatry he had allowed. His son Abijah followed his father's path for three years, and it was not until Rehoboam's grandson Asa came to the throne that Judah seriously reformed her worship, tore down the idol temples, and "did what was right in the sight of the LORD." But even Asa in his 40 year reign wobbled from time to time – he restored much gold and silver to the Temple, but then a little later sent some of it to Damascus to the king of Syria, as an inducement to join Judah in their on-going civil war with Israel.

What a mess! As commentators say of these chapters of 1 Kings, it's all "rise, reign, sin, die... rise, reign, sin, die... war and sin, sin and war." It's even hard to choose between Israel and Judah at this stage. What has happened to God's "chosen people"? The only thing that seems to mark the kingdoms out is that one royal family, the descendants of David, reigns over Judah from Jerusalem,

while the northern kingdom never establishes a dynasty that lasts. What is going on here? What is God up to?

2) *The Prophets*

The answers to those questions emerge from new figures on the Biblical scene – the Prophets. You can count Samuel as the first of the prophets, or remember that Nathan the prophet had confronted king David over his adultery. Samuel and Nathan were associated with the royal courts; spiritual advisors to the king. But now in the 9th C., a new breed of independent “men of God” appear out of nowhere, and they proclaim “the word of the LORD” and explain what God is up to and what he is planning to do.

Nathan had been the one to proclaim that “the LORD has declared that David will always have a descendant on the throne” (2 Samuel 7). *Shemaiah* “the man of God” was sent to Rehoboam right after the division of the kingdom to say “Judah must not go up and fight against her brothers in Israel” – but they went anyway. Later he tells Rehoboam that the king’s abandoning the LORD was the reason the LORD had abandoned Judah, at least for a moment, to Egypt, and calls Rehoboam to repent.

In Israel, an unnamed prophet tells Jeroboam that the altars he has built for golden calves in Bethel and Dan will be shattered. When Jeroboam’s son falls ill, the king sends his wife in disguise to *Ahijah*, the prophet who had first told Jeroboam that the LORD would give him ten tribes to rule over. But this time *Ahijah* tells Jeroboam’s wife, “your son will die,” and that the word of the LORD for Jeroboam is: “I raised you up, and tore the kingdom to give it to you... but you have done more evil than anyone before you, making idols of metal for Israel to bow down to. I will raise up a king for Israel who will

cut off the family of Jeroboam... I will *strike* Israel... I will *uproot* Israel from this good land, and *scatter* them beyond the River... I will *give Israel up* because of the sins of Jeroboam.”
(1 Kings 14).

It’s clear that the “word of the LORD” now comes not through priests or kings, but through new men called prophets. Soon there will be “schools of prophets,” and the greatest of them all, *Elijah* and his successor *Elisha*; as well as the first of the writing prophets like *Amos* and *Hosea*. Before we reach the end of this saga of kings and kingdoms, *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah* will come to proclaim the coming exile, and *Ezekiel* and others will prophesy among the exiles in *Babylon*.

Two strands of the LORD’s work therefore persist through this incredibly dark period: *his word*, now coming through the prophets, and *his royal line* of David. Behind them stands the surety of God’s *covenant* with his people: that although they will be punished when they break his commandments, yet he will always preserve for himself a small faithful “*remnant*” to carry out his purposes for the world.

3) *The Remnant*

Among the most chilling words in the Bible are the ones spoken by the prophet *Ahijah* to Jeroboam; later repeated by the apostle Paul in the 1st chapter of *Romans*. There are times when the LORD “cuts off,” “gives up,” “gives over,” certain groups of people. We like to believe, of course, that God never gives up on anyone. But the biblical view is that sin can reach such a level that God decides for a time to “let people have their own way,” even when he knows it will lead to chaos and destruction. You find that thread in the period before the Flood, in the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and in

the pagan world's rejection of God that Paul sees in the 1st century AD.

In fact when you look at the history of the world, and ponder how far and how often people and nations wander from God's ways, it is a wonder that *any* are saved, any that remain under God's protection, or within his covenant. If there is not much to choose between Judah and Israel in the 9th C. BC, then the only reason one survives at all is that God has made a promise to David - as well as to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or, if you like, to Adam and Eve and to Noah - that he will preserve for himself a faithful remnant so that he is never without witnesses on the earth. It is *not* that the people he chooses are better than others, but that he has chosen some to be witnesses to his mercy, his grace, his covenant faithfulness.

When Paul in *Romans* chapters 9-11 wrestles with exactly the question we are considering in 1 & 2 Kings - "*Whatever happened to Israel?*" - he says that "a hardening in part" has come upon Israel, but that "*even now there is a remnant chosen by grace*" to carry on as witnesses to God's work (Romans 9:28, 11:5). This is a concept we dare not miss: that God often works with very small numbers, but that doesn't mean he has "given up." At times, he focused his purposes in *one true Israelite, the Suffering Servant of the LORD*, but since then he has again "enlarged his tent" to draw in new witnesses "from the ends of the earth" - and one day, everyone everywhere will know that he is God, and every knee will bow before Jesus the Lord; and there will even come a day, as Paul says, when the "broken off branches of Israel will be grafted back into the stem" and "all Israel will be saved." (Whatever that means, exactly.) (Romans 11).

But in the meantime, we struggle with the statement that there are situations where for

a time, God "gives up" on groups of people. This was the fate of the northern kingdom of Israel, and they would be the first to fall to the invading Assyrians and be uprooted, dispersed, "scattered beyond the River" as the prophet Ahijah said. So of course we are left to ponder who else God "gives up" to chaos and destruction. Most believers today would probably say that they can see moments in history when God has allowed/willed/caused tribes, groups, nations to spiral down to destruction under the weight of their own iniquities. It is as though at times he says "all right, have it your way" - even when that way leads to chaos. There is something important in the Christian doctrine of God's providential rule that says he works in part by "holding back" iniquity and the worst consequences of sin.

Where is he doing that now? To whom? Is it only to nations, or large groups of people, or even to individuals? Does God sometimes "give us enough rope," as the old saying goes? Does he allow us to indulge in sin, with only occasional prompts of conscience or consequences, until finally he says "enough"? And does that mean "you're on your own now and must deal with the consequences of your choices," or does it often also mean "enough; I will let you wander no farther; I am reeling you in; come back to me"? I suspect we have all seen or heard or experienced both of these.

So maybe this is where we should all stop and think - that God is not fooled, that God is not taken for a fool, and that he never leaves himself without options, whether through events or through people. Even when idolatry seems rampant, we are told God "keeps for himself" "a remnant chosen by grace." Even when the heavens dry up and the earth is barren, God says he answer the prayers of the faithful few, and heals their land (2 Chronicles 7). Even when his people are in exile, if they will seek the

goodness of the place they have been exiled to, the Lord says he will in his grace bless that place for their sake and for the sake of his own Name (Jeremiah 29).

So in small groups here and now, I am sure that God often honors the prayers of the few and the faithful, and blesses their communities, and never leaves himself without witnesses to his grace. How does all this come about? *By grace* – that is, through God’s unmerited favor – shown to people who do not deserve it; shown simply so that they can declare his goodness to others and so glorify God.

Ultimately, the Scriptures teach us, that grace comes to us, in abundance, in the person, the life, the death, the resurrection and the glorification of Jesus our Lord and Savior. *He* is the one who stood alone as “the remnant of One” and dealt with the world’s sin; he is the One who calls us to trust ourselves to him, and not to our own performance – which is at heart seriously self-centered and rebellious. He is the One who shows that God does not give up on his world, but will go to any lengths to redeem it. He is the One who gives us confidence that we - *even we*, or anyone else we might consider *an unlikely object of his grace* - can in fact be so. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Let us pray...