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2 Samuel-2 Kings: The Difference Leaders Make - Lesson 2.

1 Kings: Israel's Decline and Division.

I. Succession (1:1-2:11).

A. Introduction.

First Kings is certainly logically named because it is all about kings. You have the story of Solomon in 1 Kings 1-11 . And then starting with chapter 12 and following all the way through to the end of 2 Kings, we have the stories of forty additional kings. Solomon, David's eighth-born son, became his successor. The fact that he was number eight gives you a bit of an indication of how much intrigue and difficulty there was in the succession.

B. David's Last Days

Indeed, the question of who will succeed David is what 1 Kings raises in the beginning of the book. David's fourth-born son, Adonijah, thought of himself as the logical successor. The firstborn son, Amnon, had been killed by the third-born, Absalom. The second-born son had apparently died at a young age. Absalom had been killed in battle by David's general, Joab; and so Adonijah, number four, was ready to take over. At the beginning of 1 Kings, David is old and he has hypothermia; he cannot get warm, and his advisors do something that shows their own lack of moral judgment. In those days, it was thought by the pagans that a king had the right to reign only as long as he was sexually active.

So, to try to prove that David should still be king, they have a nationwide beauty contest, and thus come up with the prettiest young thing they can find in ancient Israel, a woman named Abishag. They bring her to the king and have her go to bed with him. But in fact, the king is far too preoccupied trying to keep warm to have any romantic interests in this new wife. That is proof to Adonijah that he ought to be king, his dad is washed up. So, he schedules a big ceremony and feast and has himself anointed and proclaimed as king. When the noise of this reaches the palace, people there immediately fly into a panic because David had already promised Solomon that he would be king.

But could the decrepit David now carry this out? With the help of Bathsheba, who appears in these latter days to be David's favored wife, the group that supports Solomon has him anointed. Indeed, that catches on more popularly because, even though David is feeble, it is his own decision that they emphasize. Solomon actually becomes king in the popular mentality, and Adonijah has to recognize that his attempt at becoming king fizzled.

II. The Reign of Solomon (2:12-11:43).

A. Securing the Throne.

Now, if the rivalry was just the eighth-born son against the fourth born son, and then they shook hands, made up and all was settled, that would be one thing. But it was not so at all. Instead, we observe that Solomon works firmly to establish his power ruthlessly against all

opposition. Eventually, on a fairly thin pretext, Solomon is able to have Adonijah put to death. Solomon puts to death other rivals to the throne as well, even Joab, who had been David's extremely successful military commander. With David's permission, he was also assassinated. At the end of chapter 2 in 1 Kings, we read this statement, "The kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands." It came as the result of several occasions in which rivals to the throne, or rivals to political power, or anyone that Solomon thought might get in his way, were systematically eliminated.

B. Wisdom and Folly.

Solomon had a tremendous advantage; he was interested in and skilled in wisdom. Now, wisdom has nothing to do with IQ. Biblical wisdom is not about IQ; it is not about experience; it is not about knowledge; it is not about academic skill; it is unrelated to those sorts of topics. "Wisdom," as the Bible defines it and as the English word rather poorly translates the Hebrew word for wisdom, is the ability to make the right choices. That is what wisdom is. It is choice-making ability, and of course the Bible tells us that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the theme of Proverbs, reminding us that we will not make the right choices in life unless God is at the beginning of our choice-making. To choose Him and to fear Him orients all our ability to make the right choices.

But God gave to Solomon that ability. Solomon was already a somewhat ruthless king. He was already somewhat determined to eliminate opposition to himself. But he's imperfect like the other kings were imperfect, and God's not going to stand in the way of Israel's blessing by renegeing on the chance to do good things for the lineage of David according to His promise in 2 Samuel 7. So Solomon, the successor to David, starts off wonderfully.

He gives wise rulings in difficult cases. The people are both fascinated and thrilled with their new king. However, taking advantage of his popularity, he also does something in chapter 4 that is not ideal. He reverses the tribal district system that had been in existence since the days of Joshua that had been revealed by God in the book of Deuteronomy. Instead, in chapter 4 we read how he appointed federal governors over the special districts that he created, districts that did not coincide with the original boundaries of the tribes in the Promised Land. We see, on the one hand, a king who is very wise and can make the right choices; but on the other hand, a king who takes into his own hands things that God had originally specified were to continue the way that God planned them.

We see a king who is enormously capable at helping people and ruling for them in difficult court decisions, in teaching proverbs to people, indeed in being so wise as it says at the end of chapter 4 that his wisdom spread to all the kings of the world, but who also spent an awful lot of time and energy building up his own personal wealth. Perhaps Solomon's greatest accomplishment is the building of the temple. David had wanted to do it, but God said, "No. Instead, I have something more important for you. I am going to build up your house; you do not build mine." God had promised that your son and successor, that is Solomon, would do that job.

C. A Temple for the Name of the Lord.

With chapters 5-6 and following, we find descriptions of Solomon's determination to build that temple, and to put it into the best possible condition it could be, to make it a house for the gathering of the nations. It is a wonderful success story. He gathers together workers; he makes arrangements with Hiram, the king of Tyre, in what we would call today Lebanon, in those days Phoenicia.

Building materials are provided for the temple, many of them brought by sea to the seacoasts and then tracked over land to Jerusalem. Quarrying is undertaken and a vast complex with a temple upon it is finally constructed.

It is a beautiful temple; it is lovely and it is successful. It took seven years to build, as 1 Kings 6 describes. Then we read these rather ominous words at the beginning of chapter 7: "It took Solomon thirteen years, however, to complete the construction of his palace." It took seven years on the temple but thirteen years on his own house. Another contrast is Solomon doing the right thing for God in the temple, but then not doing the right thing in terms of paying so much attention to himself.

Further, chapters 7-8 describe the beauty of the tabernacle and its fine appointments; they describe how the ark was brought into the temple and Solomon's wonderful and theologically astute prayer of dedication for the temple. In chapter 9, God appears to Solomon and encourages him and warns him that if he is faithful he can have a long life of blessedness and success and prosperity. If, on the other hand, he is not faithful, there will be difficulties that come to him.

D. Solomon's Splendor.

In chapter 10, we read of the visit of the Queen of Sheba. This queen from the south, who had heard about Solomon but wanted to come and see for herself if he really was so wise. Could someone know so many proverbs, be so skilled at the interpretation of life, be able to describe the way choices should be made? Could this person, who was the collector and/or author of so many of those proverbs that are in what we call the book of Proverbs, really be as impressive as his reputation suggested? He was; and he had splendor in terms of his officers, in terms of his workers, in terms of the palace, and in terms of the public works projects that he had undertaken. There were just all sorts of things that he had accomplished for the people. On the other hand, we also read that, sadly, he had bankrupted the nation. So there came a time when he could not pay Hiram of Tyre what he owed him for building materials and construction help. He had to end up giving part of northern Israel over to Tyre as a payment for it, again, another kind of contrast.

E. Solomon's Spiritual Demise.

In chapter 11, we read about Solomon's spiritual and moral demise. After descriptions of many aspects of his greatness we read this: "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter (Pharaoh's daughter having been his chief early wife)." He loved Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and the Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." It says "his wives led him astray." As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord

his God, as the heart of David his father had been. David had plenty of imperfections but always was loyal to God; he worshiped the Lord alone. David trusted in the Lord alone, and knew that in the Lord alone was righteousness.

Solomon, however, followed Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites, etc. Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord. He did not follow the Lord completely as David, his father, had done. The chapter goes on to describe how Solomon actually introduced idolatry officially into Israel, how he built shrines for idol worship on the various hills around Jerusalem. At the end of Solomon's reign, around 931 B.C., we have a situation where people are worshiping the Lord, the true God, at the temple in Jerusalem. But they are also starting to worship this god, and that goddess, and various other deities at shrines that Solomon also built for them. So the great builder, the builder of the temple, the builder of the palace, and the builder of many of the public works projects around Israel, also became the builder of the pagan worship centers around the city of Jerusalem. Obviously, this was unacceptable to God, and God not only raised up a number of adversaries who fought him, but he also raised up a northerner named Jeroboam, who had been one of Solomon's officers, to oppose him and to seek to take the ten northern tribes away from Solomon's influence, in other words, the leader's revolt that would produce secession by the north from under the monarchy of Solomon.

III. Division of the Kingdom (12:1-14:31).

A. Jeroboam and Rehoboam.

When Solomon died, this very thing did happen as God had said it would. God said to Solomon, "Because of what you have done I am going to rip the nation from you, and I will leave one tribe", and He did (the tribe of Judah), as an indication of loyalty to His promise to David that there would always be a successor to him on the throne. "But most of the nation will no longer be governed by a king descended from your father David and you."

In chapter 12, Jeroboam led that revolution, and it did work. It was successful and the northern tribes broke away from Solomon's son Rehoboam once Solomon had died. Thereafter, we observe what amounts to a continuous civil war, sometimes hot, sometimes cold, but continuous, in which the north and the south are at odds. They were never again united, so there were only three kings who reigned over the whole country. There was Saul, there was David, there was Solomon; and after Solomon's death then the country splits apart, never again to be reunited during its political lifetime as a normal nation on the earth. And, there are going to be kings in the north and kings in the south.

B. Summary of Northern and Southern Kings.

It turns out, conveniently for our accounting system, that there were twenty northern kings until the north was destroyed and conquered and exiled by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. There were a total of twenty southern kings in the succession to Solomon, who reigned all the way to 586 B.C. when the Babylonians destroyed the south. It is the story of those twenty northern kings and those twenty southern kings that occupies the rest of 1 Kings and indeed on into 2 Kings.

C. Prophets: Part of the Story.

1 Kings is also the story of prophets. One of the things you have to keep in mind is that God does a lot through prophets in these books. Sometimes these are anonymous prophets; sometimes they are prophets who are identified, such as Elijah and Elisha. But the books of Kings are not only about kings; they are about the interaction, very often, of kings and prophets. There is one other big factor to keep in mind and that is the superpowers: Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, the great three powers of the Fertile Crescent, the region in which the Israelites lived. We will see increasingly that those powers have influence upon the way that the course of events goes in Israel and Judah.

D. Calf Worship Instituted by Jeroboam.

When the nation divides Jeroboam, not wanting to send his people to worship at Jerusalem, which after all was a unifying place, sets up a counter-religion, a bogus substitute religion. Well, how will the people worship? Jeroboam decides that they will go right back to the practice that had taken place as described for us in Exodus 32 and 33 at Mt. Sinai when Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments up on the mountain and Aaron and the Israelites were worshiping golden calves down at the bottom.

Following that old tradition of worshiping God by golden calves, he has golden calves made as idols, sets them up at the northern city of Dan and the relatively southern city of Bethel; and there, he causes the Israelites to sin. After about chapter 13, we see that the northern ten tribes are not worshiping the Lord in the true and right way but are worshiping by means of idols. And we are going to see that, as a result, it is impossible for any northern king to do right in the eyes of the Lord fully. Some would be better than others, but generally all twenty of them will be condemned. When you read about this king or that as a northern king, the summary statement made of him early on will be, "and he, too, did evil in the eyes of the Lord."

IV. Kings of Judah and Israel (15:1-22:53).

On the other hand, some of the southern kings were good. Of the total of twenty, the statement is made of eight of them that they "did good in the eyes of the Lord," although there are often qualifications listed. Nevertheless, if you add it up, of the forty kings of the divided monarchy that followed Solomon, sadly we observe that thirty-two of them did evil in God's opinion and only eight came even close.

A. Dynasty of Omri.

A powerful dynasty in the north is the dynasty of Omri. This dynasty is effectively represented by his son Ahab. Ahab dominates quite a few chapters toward the end of 1 Kings. He was really the north's most evil king; he was sold into idolatry by his own way of thinking. He married a Phoenician princess named Jezebel and effectively gave into her hand the religious leadership of the nation. Jezebel proceeded to persecute the prophets of the Lord. In spite of the counter-religion, in spite of the worship of idols, there were righteous prophets trying to bring the people back to faithfulness to God. Ahab, and Jezebel especially, however, were so successful in suppressing those true prophets that by chapter 17, we find the situation in which only one is

actually able to show his face in public (most of them have gone underground and are in hiding). That one is God's prophet Elijah.

B. Elijah and Elisha.

For many chapters, starting in chapter 17, what Elijah does or what Ahab does kind of interact one with another. Soon enough, it is Elijah's successor, Elisha, who is the central figure. And for a time, toward the end of 1 Kings and the beginning of 2 Kings, you are reading more about prophets than you are about kings, because God wanted His people to know His Word; He wanted His truth to be understood. Strongly, a prophet like Elijah represented the Lord. Fiercely, though he stood for God and impressively though his miracles and those of his successor, Elisha, were visible to the people, sadly however, the attractions of idolatry were terribly powerful. And those attractions kept the people of Israel away from worshipping the true and living God almost all the time.

C. An Uneasy Alliance.

There is even a story in 1 Kings 22 of how both the northern and southern kings, for a short time, have made peace; so King Ahab and King Jehoshaphat are together going to war against a common enemy.

They cannot even get a true word from the Lord because all the prophets are false. They finally get one lone prophet named Micaiah to come and prophesy the truth and they hate it when he does.

D. Conclusion.

The northern and southern kings do not believe Micaiah. He predicts disaster for them. Indeed the book comes to a close right after that story of disaster, with King Ahab being killed in battle across the Jordan River to the east, and with the death of Jehoshaphat some years later, and the sad situation of an Israel unable to be obedient to God (i.e., turning to idolatry increasingly, not listening to true prophets, worshipping at locations that are illegal, and by worshipping golden calves that are not God's will but the very opposite thereof). One gets the impression that this cannot last. One gets the impression, even as 1 Kings ends and 2 Kings begins, that this nation is going downhill and is going to be in big trouble.