

The Fall of Israel
1 Kings 15:1 – 17:41
Lecture by Dellen Ludwig 2/28

Last week we saw the Lord's call for Israel to repent from all their evil ways. Hosea was a picture of redemption and God's unfailing love with which He was calling them to repentance. God never wanted to bring the punishment onto Israel that their total disobedience and unfaithfulness deserved. God sent prophets like Hosea and Amos and Isaiah to warn them. He sent wars and attacks all around their borders to awaken them to their danger. But still Israel did not repent. God even gave good kings as an example in Judah, but still they stubbornly continued down the road to destruction.

We'll see today that, at the same time, one king of Judah decided to join into the terrible practices done by the other ten tribes, but one prophet stood up against sin. God blessed the kings who worshiped Him and followed His commands. But this lesson also shows us the ease at which just one king could throw away all those blessings his ancestors had labored to accomplish. This week's lesson will begin the final down-hill slide by the Northerners kings of Israel, ending with their exile from the Promised Land.

Let's begin by reviewing the life of a good king of Judah, King Uzziah. We learned previously how his father, Amaziah thought he was ready to challenge Joash's experienced army in

battle. Joash sent a message belittling Amaziah's challenge as though he were a thistle that would be easily crushed. Amaziah had two strikes against him as he made this challenge. First, he was too proud about his previous campaign in which he soundly defeated Edom. And secondly he had brought home the gods of the Edomites to worship, and now God would not bless him.

Amaziah was thoroughly defeated, he was captured and Jehoash broke down the walls of Jerusalem. That left Judah without a king for a while. But Amaziah returned when Jehoash died and lived for fifteen more years until he was assassinated in Lachish. And finally his son Azariah was made king, when he became 16 years old.

Now, Azariah “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.” But during his reign, “the high places, however were not removed; the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there.” [2 Kings 15:3,4] In Chronicles Azariah was called Uzziah. In Hebrew, the name Azariah meant: “help of Jehovah;” while Uzziah meant: “strength of Jehovah”. Both names were known and describe his life as king. He began at a young age to help govern Judah with regents while his father had to hide from the assassins who later found him in Lachish. In 2 Chronicles 26:5 his good reign was qualified; “He sought God during the days of Zachariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he

sought the Lord, God gave him success.”

Once he was anointed as king in his father's place, Uzziah built up an army that 2 Chronicles 26:11 called a “well-trained army, ready to go out by divisions according to their numbers.” God gave him success against the Philistines, the Arabs, and the Meunites. The Ammonites even brought him tribute. He gained fame for capturing and building the port on the Red Sea called Elah, for Judah's trade. He even placed special devices from which arrows could be more safely shot from the walls of Jerusalem, and stones could be hurled down on besieging armies. (v.15)

Once he had peace around him, he began a rebuilding campaign. He began with the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down in the war against Jehoash. Then he built towers and cisterns for his flocks and people farming his lands protection. He loved the land and determined to keep his people safe from invaders while his agriculture flourished. With the trading port prepared and safety of his kingdom improved, his fame grew as did his property. 2 Chronicles 26:15 &16 tell us, “His fame spread far and wide, for he was greatly helped until he became powerful. But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense.”

Now, it is not explained why Uzziah thought this was a good

idea. It hints that his pride led him to it. Zachariah, the godly priest of his grandfather dead by this time. Without him, was Uzziah left with no way to test his conscience? Did he become impatient with the other priests and decide to go on with worship himself, instead of waiting for them? Can't our attitude effect our worship as well? Just taking for granted our worship, or being impatient at a "long-winded" preacher or lecturer, can made us slip into Uzziah's prideful place.

In Numbers 18:7, the Lord told Aaron, "But only you and your sons may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain. I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift. Anyone else who comes near the sanctuary is to be put to death." Uzziah was a descendant of the tribe of Judah, not of Levi, Aaron's tribe.

Therefore, when Uzziah began to go into the temple, the priest Azariah rallied 80 other priests to try to stop him. King Uzziah wouldn't listen as they tried to confront him, while he picked up a censer, ready to burn incense. Verse 19 states that he began to rage in anger at the priests who tried to stop him, and at that moment, just as he approached the altar of incense, leprosy broke out on his forehead.

Here is our illustration of Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." His reputation had

brought him pride, and he believed his own “press”. His own father had lost his freedom because he pridefully challenged Israel to a war he lost. It didn't matter that he called it “worship”, Uzziah also had fallen into deep pride. However, in mercy, the Lord gave him leprosy, and fifteen years to change his heart, instead of losing his life. Because of the courageous actions of the priests, he did not touch the altar of incense, and so was not struck down in death for it, as he surely would have been.

Pride is a tool of Satan. He had so much pride he thought he should be worshiped like God. So he also entices us to be proud of ourselves too. It might be because of accomplishments, or talents, or our innate characteristics, education, or economic position; but we are all tempted to be prideful. Sometimes we just think we deserve accolades because we are serving God.

But in Romans 12: 1-3 we are reminded, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” God chose every believer to use the gifts of grace He gave us to tell others about Christ. We have no need of pride when

it is His gifts and His power we are using, to accomplish His will. He should get the glory, and He should be worshiped, never us.

Therefore, Uzziah finished his remaining years living in a separate house. The word translated “separate” here, could also be translated a “freedom” house. When one had leprosy, he was sequestered, and free from responsibilities, because he could not have other people around him. This was a very fitting punishment for his pride and judging from the quality of character built into his son Jotham, his repentance was genuine with renewed faith.

Jotham followed his father's good example, not his prideful disobedience. During his 16 years as king, he continued to work on Jerusalem's walls and to fortify towns in the hill country and wooded areas. He also led the Judaen army to a victory against the Ammonites and they continued paying tribute to Judah for three years.

However, during Uzziah's life, Israel had a time of near anarchy shown by a series of poor kings. In our homework we scoped out how quickly they rose to power, and then lost it. Commentaries calculated that in the space of 22 years, six kings followed one after the other, and only one of them died of natural causes. In Uzziah's 38th year: Zechariah became king in Samaria for 6 months. His death was the fulfillment of Hosea 1:4. He died by the sword as Jehu's last heir, as punishment for Jehu's slaughter

in Jezreel.

Then Shallum reigned one month, Menahem reigned 10 years, and Pekahiah reigned 2 years, until Pekah became king. The scriptures said of each of these men, “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, as his predecessors had done. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit,” [2Kings 15:9, 18, 24, 28] Only Shallum didn’t have this epitaph, because he did not live long enough to show his proclivity to evil.

It seemed like God was searching for just one king to turn things around. Perhaps one would stop the spiral of evil and idol worship for this Northern half of Israel, so that God could show his mercy to them. But each one followed right along in the idolatry and perversion of worship that Jeroboam had begun.

In 2 Peter 3:9 Peter tells new believers that God is even now showing his patience, wanting all to come to repentance. Perhaps God has placed you, as a believer, at this time in your family's history to stop your family's spiral. Perhaps you are to be the one who “does right” in the eyes of the Lord. Could it be that the gift of sobriety God gave you is what could change the course of history for your children or grandchildren? Could the gift of a solid marriage change the chains of divorce that has scarred the past? Could the gift of peace instead of anxiety make all the

difference in showing your family and friends God reigns in my heart. God can rewrite our history. He's waiting to use us for His glory as we "do right" in his eyes.

Uzziah reigned in Judah for 52 years, and during his 50th year, Peka took Pekahiah's throne in Samaria. He also did evil in the eyes of the Lord and greatly effected Judah as well. But his story is very wrapped up in the life of Jotham's son, Ahaz.

Ahaz became king of Judah when he was 20 years old. But he did not continue his father Jotham's good legacy. 2 Chronicles 28:2-4 described Ahaz's reign: "He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and also made idols for worshiping the Baals. He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree." Just as it takes only one chosen person to change a family's legacy, it takes only one king to choose evil to change a nation's history.

Pekah had been king in Israel for 17 years when Ahaz became king of Judah. After a short time, Pekah made a treaty with Rezin, king of Aram. Now, this was unusual because Aram had been an historical enemy of Israel. But Pekah felt Assyria growing in power and Aram together with Israel could make a

formidable wall against attacks by Assyria. Once this treaty began, Pekah felt more powerful, and to firm up their treaty, Pekah decided to lead their joined forces against Judah. The extra plunder they could find in Jerusalem would make them both rich and help pay tribute to Assyria that Meneham had started. So, Israel and Aram laid seige to Jerusalem.

Pekah thought he had imagined this attack himself. However, in 2 Chronicles 28:5 his idea was explained from God's point of view, as judgment on Ahaz's idolatry: "Therefore the Lord God delivered him into the hands of the king of Aram. The Arameans defeated him and took many of his people as prisoners and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hands of the king of Israel, who inflicted heavy casualties on him."

Ahaz should have understood his need for the God of his ancestors. Prophets had told him he must not worship idols. But Ahaz chose the deceitful way of idols. He didn't worship just one idol, but it seemed he worshiped every idol he could find! 2 Kings summed up his life, mirroring what we read in 2 Chronicles, saying: "He followed the ways of the kings of Israel ... " [2 Kings 16: 3] At the end of his life, he even adopted the idols and worship of the kings he feared.

Then this terrible war happened. You would think this would be a wake-up-call, to bring Ahaz to repentance. But we found out

that instead of turning to God, Ahaz turned to another enemy.

Rather than falling face first before God, as Israel and Aram marched toward his gate, Ahaz sent an envoy to Assyria. 2 Kings 16:7 &8 recorded: “Ahaz sent messengers to say to Tiglath Pileser king of Assyria, 'I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.' And Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria.” This would be his first tribute payment to Assyria.

2 Kings also told about this attack against Ahaz. Because the two kings could not break Jerusalem's walls, due to the reinforcements done by Uzziah and Jotham, they left and raided all of the towns they came to in Judah. Rezin king of Aram defeated Ahaz, reclaimed Elath and took many people away as slaves to Damascus. Pekah king of Israel killed 120,000 of Judah's soldiers in one day, and took 200,000 wives, sons and daughters and a great deal of plunder, and started back to Samaria.

This was a devastating war. It weakened Judah almost to destruction. But God had mercy on his people. So, before we traced Ahaz in his final plunge into darkness, we turned to follow the poor captives as they were taken away from Judah toward Samaria. God was not willing to give up on Judah yet. He called

up a prophet named Oded to save a nation. God sent this one prophet to speak up against Israel's army as they returned home with these wives, sons and daughters who were actually distant relatives of theirs. In 2 Chronicles 28:9-11 we heard his plea: "Because the Lord, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand. But you have slaughtered them in a rage that reaches to heaven. And now you intend to make the men and women of Judah and Jerusalem your slaves. But aren't you also guilty of sins against the Lord your God? Now listen to me! Send back your fellow Israelites you have taken as prisoners, for the Lord's fierce anger rests on you!"

This prophet is not mentioned anywhere else in scripture. We don't know where he came from, or where he lived. But he turned a tragedy of trauma into a gift of grace by standing up for what was right exactly when the Lord prompted him to do so. Seeing the returning army stopped just outside of Samaria, some of the leaders of the city came out to join Oded in confronting the soldiers. The Lord caused the words of the prophet to reverberate in their hearts. They said, "You must not bring those prisoners here, ... or we will be guilty before the Lord. Do you intend to add to our sin and guilt? For our guilt is already great, and his fierce anger rests on Israel." [2 Chronicles 28:13] These were words of repentance.

Together they convinced the soldiers and the people of Samaria to not just let the people go, but to clothe, feed and supply them out of their spoil, for a journey back toward Judah. They put healing balm on their wounds. They even released some donkeys to transport those too weak to walk any more. And then, they took them back as far as Jericho, a town very close to Jerusalem, yet still in Israel's territory. God through the challenge of this one prophet and a few good men, returned his people to Judah and freed these prisoners to go back to their families.

You would think that this amazing show of God's mercy would have given Ahaz a pause to rethink the object of his worship. But it did not. He received a report that now, seeing his weakness, the Edomites and Philistines were raiding Judah from the east and the west at once. So, once again, Ahaz sent to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria for help. It was the Lord who sent this wave of aggressive neighbors against him, because "... he had promoted wickedness in Judah and had been most unfaithful to the Lord." [2 Chronicles 28:19] Yet, again, Ahaz didn't repent.

Tiglath-Pileser was the first of three dynamic kings of Assyria. It was he who began the expansion of Assyria into the empire which would swallow Northern Israel into exile in a few short years. The king of Assyria came as Ahaz requested and conquered Edom. But without realizing it, this attack had breached

the wall of alliance Pekah had used to protect his kingdom. Now, nothing stood in the way of Tigleth-Pileser plucking Samaria when it was ripe. And Judah would stand alone to face them in the future.

Tigleth-Pileser occupied Damascus at the end of this war. He called for Ahaz to come to deliver his tribute there. When Ahaz went, it was not with fear and trembling, but with eyes of wonder at the idols of Aram. He had to pay his tribute, so he had melted down the vessels from the temple, his palace and from the official families of Judah. But as he brought this tribute, he also “offered sacrifices to the gods of the kings of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought, 'Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me.'...” [2 Chronicles 28:23] However, as the rest of this verse says, “But they were his downfall and the downfall of all Israel.”

Ahaz was awed at the gods he saw in Damascus, but also at the altar there. He sent detailed drawings of it back to Uriah the priest in Jerusalem and ordered that he build an altar just like it in the courtyard of the temple. When Ahaz returned from Damascus, he was pleased with the altar and offered sacrifices like those to be offered to Jehovah on this new altar. However, the priest had built the new altar behind the old altar as one stood facing the temple opening. So, Ahaz demanded that the Lord's altar of sacrifice be

moved to the side of the new one, and that all sacrifices should be now offered on the new altar. But he didn't stop there.

Ahaz had all of the ornamentation taken off of the ten, movable basins used for sacrifices and then removed the basins as well. He had men take the great bronze basin called the "sea" (that was used for washing and purification) off of the backs of the bronze oxen Solomon had built. Then he set the sea back onto stone stands. He removed the canopy and the ornate entrance where past kings entered the courtyard to worship.

Ahaz wanted nothing to do with the worship of Jehovah as ordained by Moses and provided by Solomon. He ended up cutting up the furnishings inside the temple, and finally closed the doors of the temple itself. He may have used the gold as part of his tribute to Assyria that he needed to send every year.

Then, he set up altars on every street corner in Jerusalem. 2 Chronicles 28:26 explains how his obsession with idols spread. "In every town in Judah he built high places to burn sacrifices to other gods and aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of his ancestors." 2 Kings 16:20 explains Ahaz did this: "in deference to the king of Assyria."

He told himself that Tigleth-Pileser would like his changes and that turning his back on Jehovah would get him into the Assyrian king's good graces. However, scripture clearly related

that God hated idolatry. God had clearly said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” [Exodus 20:2 &3] By conforming to Assyria's idea of worship, Ahaz buried himself in idol worship and sealed his reign as evil in the eyes of God.

How many of the decisions we make are done to please others or out of fear of others, or what they might think of us? Even Uriah the priest obeyed Ahaz's destruction of the temple out of fear of his king. The Lord Jesus reassured his disciples, when he was about to send them out on their own to be his witnesses, with the words of Matthew 10:28: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” This earth is not our final destination. We have eternity ahead of us. We need to be heavenly minded, during our journey on the earth, to accomplish what is right in God's eyes.

While Ahaz spent his last years propagating idol worship in Judah, Pekah ended his kingly career in fear of the king of Assyria. Tiglath-Pilezer continued his campaign against Aram by heading also into territory that was part of Israel. 2 Kings 15:29 recorded that Assyria took towns that were on the northern edges traditionally held by the tribe of Naphtali, and on the east side of the Jordan, down to Galilee, the area north of the Sea of Galilee.

They performed the transfer of ownership in a method for which the Assyrian's became infamous: they carried away captive the inhabitants to a less inhabited area of their kingdom. Tiglath-Pilezer then began the war against Samaria, which was finished later by his successor, Shalmaneser.

Because of these attacks, Pekah saw his kingdom shrinking before his very eyes. But his officials saw him as unworthy to be their king. Hoshea son of Elah conspired and assassinated Pekah, to become king of the ailing kingdom after him. He also did evil in God's eyes, but 2 Kings recorded in chapter 17, verse 2, "but not like the kings of Israel who preceded him." We don't know his attitude about idols or God, but he did not turn to ask God for help as his country faced the crushing tribute demanded by Assyria year by year.

Instead, one year he withheld that tribute and sent it to So the king of Egypt to try to team up with him against Assyria. So, was the first king, or pharaoh of Egypt's split northern kingdom. They were not as strong as Hoshea thought they were. So, when Shalmaneser discovered this duplicity, he marched down the coast and defeated Egypt's army, and returned to lay siege to Samaria itself. As had happened in an earlier war, the Assyrian Empire continued this war even as their leaders changed. Shalmaneser was replaced by Sargon and in the ninth year of Hoshea, they

conquered Israel.

Again, Assyria led off the captured people into a land they did not know, along the river Harbor. For several years, the Northern kingdom laid abandoned. Weeds grew up in the untended fields and wild animals roamed in the towns. Finally Assyria brought in other people from conquered lands like Babylonia, to occupy Israel in their exile.

But “When they first lived there, they did not worship the Lord; so he sent lions among them and they killed some of the people.” [2 Kings 17:25] The people also worshiped idols and believed that each god in their pantheon originated and had authority in a specific area. So, in their superstition, they believed that the “god” of this area must require pacification sacrifices so he would leave them alone. They plead their case to the king of Assyria and he sent a priest from Israel from among his captives, to go and help these settlers.

Now we remember that when Jeroboam set up calf worship in Israel, the priests and Levites of Jehovah left the country. He replaced them with anyone who would pay the fee, and they led the country for all those years in idol worship, not the worship of the one true God. So even as this “priest” instructed the new inhabitants in Israel's worship, it was still idol worship. Therefore, the new inhabitants merely added these rites and rituals to their

own idol worship, and added Israel's "god" to their pantheon of existing gods. And thereby the foundation for the mixed up faith of the "Samaritans" began, that continued down to Jesus' day.

As Judah's Northern half laid in the hands of strangers, they felt vulnerable to the huge Assyrian Empire, who's tentacles grew on three of their four borders. As Ahaz survived his last three years, Judah must have trembled fearing when Assyria would turn on them. But God had more work to do through Judah. And even in exile, God was not finished with Israel.

When we studied Hosea we read verses like chapter 11, verse 8 & 9 "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboym? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God and not a man -the Holy One among you...They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves. I will settle them in their homes', declares the Lord."

God saw the exile as purifying discipline. Although his people would all have to go into captivity, their desire for idols would be cleansed away in it. What things have we placed higher in our desires than our worship of God? What does it take to cleanse our hearts of our idols? Perhaps we intellectually say, "Oh

no! I don't worship idols!" But are we like the captives in Israel who mixed the worship of God with other familiar objects of security?

Our idols may not have names like Sukkoth Benoth or Nergal or Ashima. But we are well familiar with those called fame, wealth, entertainment, or pleasure. Our idols can replace the worship of Jehovah just as fully as all of the gods of Ahaz did. We no longer belong to those other gods. We have been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, who took the punishment we deserved for our sin of idolatry, on the cross. Now we cannot let ourselves go back under the slavery to those false gods.

Instead we must turn our backs on false or watered down worship through repentance of our pride and dedicate ourselves to the one true God who saved us.

In Galatians Paul wrote to encourage believers that they did not need to fall back under the slavery of a mixed up faith of works. Let's end our talk by reading Galatians 5:13-16: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So, I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the

flesh.”

Let us be the one person, who did what was right in the eyes of God.